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Edwin Grabhorn

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE GRABHORN PRESS

Francis P. Farquhar

COMMENTS ON SOME BAY AREA FINE PRINTERS

Interviews Conducted by

Ruth Teiser

Berkeley  
1968





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The two portraits of Edwin Grabhorn were painted by his wife, Irma Grabhorn. Following his death on December 16, 1968, Mrs. Grabhorn made this statement concerning the paintings and the unity she felt to be in Mr. Grabhorn's appearance, his character and his work:

"I always felt that Ed's face looked exactly like his work, his title pages: the proportions, the lines almost needle sharp at their turns, the fine planes, accentuated by the eager, bright gaze. I was very much taken with his profile, which gave away his gentleness and kindness, a nobility so well balanced. He was so very dynamic. He lived, in relentless rhythm, the present moment creatively. His powerful spirit and harmoniousness are reflected in his work, from the subject matters of his books to the title pages, the printing types, the bindings; all are summed up into an inextricable whole beauty."

Portraits painted 1964.







Books and Printing in the San Francisco Bay Area

Interviews Completed by October, 1968

Brother Antoninus *Brother Antoninus: Poet, Printer, and Religious*

Edwin Grabhorn *Recollections of the Grabhorn Press*

Jane Grabhorn *The Colt Press*

Robert Grabhorn *Fine Printing and the Grabhorn Press*

Warren R. Howell *Two San Francisco Bookmen*

Haywood Hunt *Recollections of San Francisco Printers*

Lawton Kennedy *A Life In Printing*

Oscar Lewis *Literary San Francisco*

Bernhard Schmidt, Herman Diedrichs, Max Schmidt, Jr. *The Schmidt Lithograph Company, Vol. I*

Albert Sperisen *San Francisco Printers 1925-1965*

Edward DeWitt Taylor, supplement to interview with Francis Farquhar

Adrian Wilson *Printing and Book Designing*





## INTRODUCTION

Edwin Grabhorn, whose Grabhorn Press was for many years one of the most renowned printing enterprises of the Western world, began his career as a music printer in an uncle's shop in Indianapolis. As he recounts in this interview, his first experience on the Pacific Coast was in Seattle, where as a young man he worked as a music printer, then turned to general printing and went into business for himself briefly. There he first became acquainted with the work of Frederic W. Goudy, which was to become a major influence.

The Studio Press, established in 1915 by Edwin Grabhorn after his return to Indianapolis, brought his first national notice, and there he printed his first books. There too his younger brother Robert, who was to become an integral part of the Grabhorn Press, first came to work for him between high school terms. Together, in 1919, they journeyed to San Francisco and the next year established The Press of Edwin and Robert Grabhorn. By the time the name was changed to The Grabhorn Press some five years later, their fresh, imaginative work was creating much interest among aficionados of fine printing, and among the city's advertising agencies for which they did considerable composition. Later, as Edwin Grabhorn explains in this interview, the press shifted its attention almost completely to books. They had been his



primary interest since boyhood when he had spent hours in the Indianapolis public library examining title pages.

The Grabhorn Press, which continued in operation until the end of 1965, became a legendary and rather magic place to many. It was made so in part by its clear regard for producing works to its own highly regarded artistic and technical standards, in part by Ed Grabhorn's gregariousness and love of humorous tale-spinning. Some of his tales are reflected in the numerous articles that have been written about the press, and in David Magee's introductions to the two Grabhorn Press bibliographies. Others are recorded for the first time here. In addition, he here gives serious discussion to types.

The interview was held in four sessions in 1967 (July 18, July 21, July 25 and August 15) in the main room of the no longer officially operating Grabhorn Press. Mr. Grabhorn had been ill and had some difficulty in speaking, but his recollections were clear. No outline was followed, and rearrangement of the sequence of some sections was done by the interviewer in editing. The transcript was read to Mr. Grabhorn by Mrs. Grabhorn; almost no changes were made.

This interview with Edwin Grabhorn comprises one of a series of interviews on books and printing in the San Francisco Bay Area that has been undertaken by the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library on the advice of



Professor James D. Hart, Department of English. Most of the other individuals interviewed in the series discussed the Grabhorn Press, some at length. They include Robert and Jane Grabhorn. In addition, Oscar Lewis, in his interview, *Literary San Francisco*, recalled his long association with the Grabhorn Press.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons prominent in recent California history. The office is under the direction of Mrs. Willa Baum, and under the administrative supervision of the Director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser  
Interviewer

2 December 1968  
Regional Oral History Office  
Room 486 The Bancroft Library  
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Berkeley, California



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EDWIN GRABHORN

Career Beginnings: Indianapolis and Seattle

Teiser: Where were you born?

Grabhorn: I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Teiser: On what date?

Grabhorn: October 29, 1889.

Teiser: How did you become interested in printing in the first place?

Grabhorn: I'll tell you. Very simple. I had an uncle who had a printing office in Indianapolis, Indiana, and I went to work for him for two dollars and a half a week.

Teiser: How old were you?

Grabhorn: About thirteen.

Teiser: What was your uncle's name?

Grabhorn: Harry, Harry Grabhorn. He had bought a printing office and had a tremendous quantity of miscellaneous types that were in fashion at the time. No two types were what they call "lining." They all were on a different line. So if you set them up in a stick they all were up and down. They never lined. However, each type case had a little phrase set out of the same type that was in the



Grabhorn: case. And the phrases were interesting--"Woodman, spare that chestnut tree," "He's as simple as an ostrich but he thinks he knows it all."  
[Laughter] So he'd say, "Set this out: 'Woodman, spare that chestnut tree.'"

Teiser: And that's how you learned to set type?

Grabhorn: Yes. And he had some music type, and I taught myself how to set it.

Teiser: Did you know anything about playing any instrument?  
Did you know anything about music?

Grabhorn: No, no.

Teiser: How could you learn to set music type then?

Grabhorn: Well, I.....he wouldn't teach me. He wanted to keep this knowledge to himself. So I heard some men talking. When I was a little boy I worked for Tom Taggart in French Lick Springs, where they bottled Pluto Water. I worked in a printing office there. In going to visit my folks in Indianapolis I heard some railroad men talking, waiting for the noon train. One of them said Seattle was going to be the [fastest growing] town of the country. So I decided I wanted to go to Seattle. I bought a Seattle newspaper and then wrote to Sherman, Clay, who had an office there, and told them I was a music printer and wanted a job, and I wanted to come to Seattle; was there any music



Grabhorn: printing office? They wrote back and said, yes they thought there was one, the Liberal Printing Company on Pine Street. So I wrote them for a job as a music printer. I was getting nine dollars a week and I asked for thirteen. And they said they could use a music printer; if I was worth more they'd give me more than \$13 a week. All my friends didn't think I could hold down a job at \$13 a week because the union scale was only \$17.40 in Indianapolis. Well, I saved \$5 a week out of my \$9, and then I asked my uncle for it. He wouldn't give it to me. I had \$80 saved up. He wouldn't give it to me without two weeks' notice. So I was delayed a week in going to Seattle, and I wrote them and said, "I'm delayed a week. Would the job be open?" They wrote back and said, "The job is open until you come." I thought that was terribly funny. [Laughter]

When I got to Seattle, it was run by Swedes and one of the partners was a musician. They wanted to set music type. They had all this music type that they didn't know how to set. I asked for \$25 a week when I got there. They made me sign a contract that I wouldn't ask for a wage raise within six weeks.

Teiser: How many characters are there in a music case?



Grabhorn: There are about 450.

Teiser: I don't see how you could have learned to set that.

Grabhorn: Oh, it's simple. You build it up like you do blocks in the stick. You start with little pieces and then build it up, with little pieces of type.

Teiser: This still was just ordinary printing. Did you have at that early age a concept of fine printing?

Grabhorn: Yes. I contacted a man in Seattle who was a good printer. He probably took the *American Printer* and the *Inland Printer*. He had some Goudy type, and that's where I learned about Goudy type.

Teiser: Was he Henry Anger?

Grabhorn: He was Henry Anger. Do you know him?

Teiser: I've heard of him. What was he known as?

Grabhorn: "The panel man of the Rockies." In those days, they put rules around things and called them panels, you know. He had some of Goudy's type. And of course, I thought all it took to be a good printer was the type. And I wanted some Goudy type. I finally got some and he got mad at me and called me the Westlake edition of his press.

Teiser: Henry Anger did?

Grabhorn: Yes. Many years later he wanted to work for me and I wouldn't give him a job.

Teiser: Was he the only printer in Seattle who had high printing ideals?





Grabhorn: Yes. He was.

Teiser: Haywood Hunt, I think, was in Seattle at that time.

Grabhorn: Yes. Haywood Hunt was there too. He worked at the Lumberman Printing Company. I knew Haywood Hunt in Seattle.

Teiser: Did Haywood give you any idea of fine printing?

Grabhorn: No. Haywood is an old maid.

Teiser: Was he even as a young man?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: I thought he was rather inspiring to young printers.

Grabhorn: Might have been, yes. I couldn't be inspired by Haywood. I don't know why. He was always ambitious. He was a great friend of Henry Anger.

Teiser: He remembers his early meeting with you in Seattle with great pleasure.

Grabhorn: That's the reason I came West [to San Francisco], Haywood Hunt.

Teiser: In Seattle you had your own first printing shop\*. How did that go?

Grabhorn: Well, I'll tell you. I was too young. I wasn't twenty-one years old, and I spent my time playing tennis and having a good time. And I had a good many opportunities. A lawyer took interest in me and offered to finance me through the University of Washington. But I didn't take it up. I thought

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\*The University Press



Grabhorn: I'd be owned by the man that financed me, you see.

Teiser: Who was he?

Grabhorn: His name was Hart. He was a big lawyer in Seattle. He said, "You don't want to be a printer all your life, do you?" And I thought that was pretty awful. My idea was, if you had to be a printer, you might as well be a good one.

Teiser: So you gave up in Seattle after that early trial?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: How did you happen to leave the music printers, incidentally?

Grabhorn: It was monotonous. I kept making lots of money, but to set up music type is like building with blocks. You get it up and tear it down. I used to illustrate the symphony programs in Seattle.

Teiser: How?

Grabhorn: With music. There was a man by the name of Henry Hadley there. He later came down to San Francisco; became a director down here. I set up a march for him up there.

Teiser: Did you ever do anything with music type other than set regular music with it? Did you ever play with it?

Grabhorn: No. I illustrated their symphony programs. The themes going through. The reason I gave up music type: there was a limitation to it. You set up



Grabhorn: the most complicated piece of music and you got no more out of it. You wouldn't get the interest out of it, of setting up display type, you know.

Teiser: Did you set up regular type with it at the same time?

Grabhorn: Yes. I used to print a song for anybody who wrote it for \$50, and make plates of the music. One lady, I never will forget her; she was an old schoolteacher. She wrote a song about the sunset and wanted a picture of the sunset on the title page. I got a black and white cut of a sunset and printed it. When she came to see the music, she looked at the title page and her face kind of fell. I said, "What's the matter? It's a sunset you wanted and I put a sunset." She said, "Yes, but that isn't the sunset I had reference to."  
[Laughter] So I learned about women from her.

Teiser: Did she pay you?

Grabhorn: She paid me.

I printed a song. There was a young man up there who used to play the piano on the Barbary Coast, and he was quite good. In those days, you know, when you were pitching a piece of music, you didn't have radio and television. You had to do what you called plug it yourself by playing it in a music store when people would come in. If you



Grabhorn: did that frequently you could probably sell a thousand copies in a month, you know. This young piano player from the Barbary Coast, his name was Warren Camp. He brought me a piece of music called, "The Rag With No Name." He sold a thousand copies a week for six weeks. I said to myself, "Here's a young man I've got to tie up with." So I bought a piece of music from him. I thought with his success with his "Rag With No Name," my piece of music would go along with it. He sold me a piece of music for \$100, and I paid him the \$100. Going back to work the next morning, I found he'd dropped dead from an overdose of morphine. He couldn't take all the money, you know. So that ended my music venture.

Teiser: Seattle must've been a pleasant place for a young man to be.

Grabhorn: I played tennis pretty well, and so I was always invited out to country clubs and things like that to play tennis. The boys from San Francisco used to come and beat the devil out of them. Morris McLaughlin. In fact, there was a tennis club out in Golden Gate Park run by an old man name Dr. Martin. He built up all those famous tennis players.

Teiser: Did you continue playing when you were in San Francisco?





Grabhorn: Yes.

Return to Indianapolis

Teiser: Let's go back....you left Seattle then and went back to Indianapolis, did you?

Grabhorn: Yes. I kept getting letters from my mother, what a good town Indianapolis had become. First when I went back I was so disappointed. It was dirty as could be. Being an inland town, the papers stayed in the street. Seattle was built on hills. They just went to the top of the hills and turned on the hoses and washed everything down into the ocean. It was clean.

Teiser: So Indianapolis looked dirty to you when you returned?

Grabhorn: Yes. And when a streetcar would go down the street it would go so fast that it would drag a cloud of dust behind it.

Teiser: But you stayed for some years in Indianapolis?

Grabhorn: I stayed five years.

Teiser: It was then that you started the Studio Press?

Grabhorn: Yes. And it was Haywood Hunt writing to me about the beauty of San Francisco that brought me West.

Teiser: You must have developed in Indianapolis.

Grabhorn: I developed in a sense, yes. I met interesting people. I met a professor of English literature



Grabhorn: in Purdue University. He worked with Bruce Rogers. (Bruce Rogers was at Purdue.) He gave me his printing office hand press. His name was [Mark H.] Liddell. He was interested in doing a set of Shakespeare plays in the actual--each word that Shakespeare used had its own dictionary meaning of the time. So the pages were full of notes.

He wrote a small book, which I printed, called *The Typography of Shakespere's Midsommer Nightes Dreame*. When I came to San Francisco I had 100 copies. I sold it to John Howell for a dollar a copy, but I didn't reprint anything on it.

Teiser: Do you have a copy left yourself now?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: Did you meet Bruce Rogers too, in Indianapolis?

Grabhorn: No, but I talked about him.

Teiser: He was a kind of ideal of yours, was he?

Grabhorn: Yes. He used to be what they call a chalk printer.

Teiser: Chalk printer?

Grabhorn: Chalk engraver on newspapers. In fact, I collected a great many of his books. They're in the Max Kuhl Collection, in the San Francisco Public Library. I sold them to Albert Bender. Some of his rarest books I had.

Teiser: Was this a collection you had started in Indianapolis?



Grabhorn: No, when I was here. I bought them one day at Dawson's [in Los Angeles]. He had a whole collection and he didn't know what he had. He sold them for fifty cents apiece.

Teiser: That was when, in the 'thirties?

Grabhorn: No, that must've been in the 'twenties.

Teiser: What was the location of the first shop that you owned in Indianapolis, after your return from Seattle?

Grabhorn: In a building owned by the father of a boy who goes to the University of California, by the name of Holliday. I asked Mr. Holliday\* [later] if he remembered me. He said he only knew that if I was a printer I didn't pay my rent.

Teiser: Was that the Studio Press?

Grabhorn: No, it wasn't.

There were more deadbeats in that building than in any United States penitentiary. [Laughter] Underneath me was a lunch counter. I had an old Colt's Armory press. The first job I started on, I took two or three prints and the press fell apart. At lunch hour, another fellow and I sat down and laughed--if it had gone down through to the pie counter.....[laughter]. The man I was printing the job for came in the afternoon. When he saw what had happened he said, "Put on your hat and

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\* ~~J. William~~ S. Holliday



Grabhorn: coat. We'll go to Chicago. I'll buy you a new press." So we went to Chicago and we went around to all the places that make trick novelty stuff to be given away at carnivals, where you throw rings and try to get something. You buy the stuff by the barrel. You call it giving it away.

Teiser: Did you buy a press too?

Grabhorn: Yes. We bought a press. It was a very good press.

Teiser: What kind was it?

Grabhorn: Colt's Armory, a later model.

Teiser: And you took it back to Indianapolis?

Grabhorn: Yes. Then I printed for him until the press was paid for. I printed all kinds of curious things, like advertisements for what they call ski ball pool. You put them at the edge of the pool table, cut holes, put numbers on them. In fact I wrote the book of rules for ski ball pool.

Teiser: Who was the man?

Grabhorn: I don't remember his name. He'd spend \$50 to make ten cents cheap. I had to do the whole complete thing and ship the packages because the Internal Revenue was after him. He'd collect the money and throw the orders away. So constantly I had to complete the work and keep him out of jail.

Teiser: You had the Studio Press after that?





Grabhorn: Yes. I moved into a little cottage and took over the press; called it the Studio Press. The Studio Press is still running in Indianapolis. It's one of the largest printing shops in Indianapolis.

Teiser: Did it come out of the press that you had?

Grabhorn: Yes. Mine was first. How that happened, I used to do ad work for a big advertising firm in Indianapolis called Seidner and Van Riper. I set up ads for the *Saturday Evening Post* even then.

Teiser: What did they advertise?

Grabhorn: Kokomo Tire and Rubber Company. I set some of those ads. I thought it was fun. I charged them \$25 and they didn't pay me. I sent a bill. And every month for twelve months they sent me \$25. At the end of the year they stopped sending it to me.

[Laughter]

Teiser: How did you happen to go from your first shop there into the Studio Press?

Grabhorn: I don't know. But I learned one thing: you have to call your place by a name, not by your own name, like Grabhorn Press.

Teiser: Had the Studio Press been established before you went there?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: You took your press from over the lunch room and went there?



Grabhorn: Yes. From the Holliday building.

Teiser: So you'd first run a shop in Seattle briefly, then in the Holliday building in Indianapolis, then the Studio Press in Indianapolis, and then you came out to San Francisco?

Grabhorn: Yes.

### Early Influences

[Edwin Grabhorn first went to Indianapolis when he was ten, to visit his aunt.]

Grabhorn: She was a very religious woman. It was a hot summer and I said, "Gee whiz, Aunt Evie, have you got anything to read around here?" She said, "Here's the Bible. Read that." And I read the Bible until I got into all the begats. The begats floored me. [Laughter]

Teiser: It was after that that you read all of Shakespeare?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Did you really read the whole collected works?

Grabhorn: I not only read it, I could recite it.

Teiser: Was the aunt you spoke of, who gave you the Bible to read, the wife of the printer?

Grabhorn: No. She was the wife of a plumber. My mother's sister.

Teiser: Was your father a craftsman?



Grabhorn: My father\*had so many children that were craftsmen that I was the laughable one of the family. They never even thought I could do anything. I was so useless in that family. I have a brother who was a craftsman, plumber. He made a little steam engine that ran, just a tiny one.

Teiser: When he was a kid?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: And all you were doing was sitting around reading books, uselessly?

Grabhorn: Yes. My mother used to beat me for reading so much. She had a brother who read nickel novels all his life, and she thought it made you lazy to read all the time.

My brother and I, during spring vacations, would work on the farms planting onions. My brother was so good that they wouldn't hire me. And I fixed it so they couldn't hire him unless they hired me. That's how we worked all the time.

Teiser: This was the brother who became a plumber?

Grabhorn: No, this was another brother. I had five brothers.

Teiser: What were their names?

Grabhorn: He was named Walter. The third one was named Lewis, and then down to Kenneth. My mother used to, when she'd want to call us, start with the whole family and name them down to the one she wanted, then she would stop: "Edwin, Walter, Lewis, Kenneth,

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\*Henry Grabhorn



Grabhorn: come here!" [Laughter]

Teiser: Are you the oldest?

Grabhorn: Yes. Two [relatives] were out here a week ago and called on us. They are cousins, very young, and both lieutenants in the United States Army. They graduated from West Point and were on the way to the Middle East.

Teiser: What did your father do?

Grabhorn: He was a foreman in a furniture factory. He told me when I collected American furniture that I was crazy: it has so many fakes. He said, "I can make any kind of a worm hole." [Laughter]

Teiser: Did you start collecting books at all when you were in Indianapolis?

Grabhorn: Yes. I always collected books.

Teiser: What made you interested in books?

Grabhorn: Well, I used to go to the public library, and I got interested in title pages. I would take down the books and look at the title page of every book in the public library until they stopped me, because I wasn't putting them back right. [Laughter]

Teiser: You were probably the only young fellow who ever was interested in title pages in that library.  
[Laughter]





Grabhorn: I'd look and see if I could find any good ones.

Teiser: Did you find many?

Grabhorn: Not many.

Teiser: Were your parents interested in reading, or anyone in your family?

Grabhorn: My mother used to beat me for reading so much. She thought it was a form of laziness.

Teiser: So you really started reading young?

Grabhorn: Yes. I used to take nickel novels to school and put them in the geography and open the geography and read them. "Bang! And another redskin bit the dust."

Teiser: You said you worked for a print shop in French....?

Grabhorn: Lick Springs.

Teiser: French Lick Springs. Was that before you went to work for your uncle?

Grabhorn: No, it was after. I worked for a man by the name of Tom Taggart, who owned the hotel.

Teiser: What did you do?

Grabhorn: Worked in the printing office. They got out an advertisement for Pluto Water, a red devil standing up pointing to a bottle.

Teiser: Did you then print that?

Grabhorn: Yes. We had a foreman there; he had to get 250,000 letterheads in four colors. They went wrong, the colors, and he had to print a thousand good ones



Grabhorn: over to show the management they were all right.

Teiser: Did you work on that?

Grabhorn: A little bit.

Teiser: Were you operating a press then?

Grabhorn: Yes. A Colt's Armory press.

Teiser: When did you learn to run a press?

Grabhorn: When I worked for my uncle.

Teiser: You learned both typesetting and presswork then?

Grabhorn: Yes. He had what they call a Nonpareil press.

Teiser: Was that powered or foot powered?

Grabhorn: It was powered. His gauge pins, he used bent pins, paper pins, he would bend them three or four ways and stick them in the tympan so a little part stood up.

Teiser: What for?

Grabhorn: He would put the paper on them.

Teiser: Oh, use them as a guide for the paper?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Did he invent that?

Grabhorn: Yes. He invented anything cheap. He would spend all his time untying string. He had a large ball of used string. I learned then that some of those ways to save money didn't save money.

Teiser: You never were as interested in saving money as in doing things, were you?

Grabhorn: No. My uncle changed me, because people would come



Grabhorn: in and want to use the paper cutter and cut off the top part with the printing. It was of no use any more. They asked him how much they owed him for the use of the paper cutter. He'd look at the pile of paper, spit tobacco juice on the floor and say, "Well, about five cents." And I felt so humiliated I swore if I could never charge more than five cents I wouldn't charge anything for any work.

Teiser: How old were you when you went to work for him?  
About thirteen did you say?

Grabhorn: Thirteen, yes.

Teiser: Had you been to high school then?

Grabhorn: No, I never went to high school.

Teiser: Just grammar school?

Grabhorn: Yes. Eighth grade.

Teiser: Where did you go to grammar school?

Grabhorn: Number 33 in Indianapolis.

Tieser: Oh, your family had moved to Indianapolis by then?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Was your family pushing you to work?

Grabhorn: No. I went to work because I didn't like school. I remember the teacher wrote a note to my family that I was too bright to quit school. I should keep it up.

Teiser: But you didn't want to?

Grabhorn: No, I didn't want to.



Teiser: Were you reading a lot then?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: How did you happen to work for your uncle?

Grabhorn: He offered me a job. His shop was in a basement. I remember reading a short skit. "The devil was looking out of the window. In fact this was not the common enemy of man, but a small imp commonly known as a printer's devil." [Laughter]

### To San Francisco

Teiser: When did you come to San Francisco?

Grabhorn: 1919. I came on Christmas day. It was raining and I thought I'd made a poor choice. I stopped off first in Los Angeles. There was a bunch of men in Los Angeles that wanted me to start there. They offered to build me a building and give me a fee if I started in Los Angeles.

Teiser: How did they know you?

Grabhorn: I don't know. They were a group of well-known men there.

Teiser: You were known from your Studio Press?

Grabhorn: Yes. They had a convention out here [in San Francisco] and some men from Seidner and Van Riper advertising agency came out here and brought some of my printing with them. They came back and told me there was no chance for me. There was a man in





Grabhorn: San Francisco they were crazy about called John Henry Nash. They thought he was a big blowhard.

Teiser: When Haywood Hunt wrote you about San Francisco, did you decide to come here on the basis of what he told you about it?

Grabhorn: Yes. He sent me some of Nash's printing.

Teiser: You thought if there was room for Nash there was room for you, or what?

Grabhorn: Well, I knew one thing: Nash used rules for decorations, and a good rule in printing was no rule. In those days they printed rules and panels and put the printing in the rules. He was known as a whiz at mitering corners.

Teiser: Is that hard to do, to miter a corner?

Grabhorn: Well, it is; you've got to be careful.

Teiser: So you decided against Los Angeles after all?

Grabhorn: I did, because it was the day before Christmas and it was a warm, beautiful day and I thought you couldn't do any work printing in a warm country unless you were a millionaire and you could loaf. It was not good for printing like San Francisco was.

Teiser: You had never been in San Francisco before?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: You came up on the train, did you?

Grabhorn: Yes. It was raining. But that was all right.



Teiser: Where did you go to stay?

Grabhorn: I don't remember. I must've gone someplace.

Teiser: Was your brother Bob with you?

Grabhorn: Yes. You see, we'd sent our printing material from Indianapolis to Los Angeles. We didn't have anything 'til finally it came by freight to San Francisco.

Teiser: Did you work for a brief time in a print shop here before you established your own press?

Grabhorn: Yes I did. I was a union printer and I worked for a little printing office--I forget the name--on California Street and Kearny. It was a little basement shop. And I didn't say anything to the man, just applied for a job as a printer. He would bring me envelope corners to set up and tell me the sizes, the types, et cetera, and I listened to him and said nothing. One day the printing magazine, *Pacific Printer*, came out and told about me being there and showed samples of some of the work I'd done in Indianapolis. This printer came in and said, "Well, we got an artist working here!" [Laughter] So I went out to lunch and never came back\*.

I'll tell you why I came to California. Printing depends on the climate. For instance, if you print something on wet paper and the weather is dry, the paper dries while you're printing and curls up.

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\*The printer is said to have been Chris Beran. Ruth



Grabhorn: It doesn't look the same. You've got to keep it uniformly damp. And the California weather, the damp air, keeps the paper in the correct condition for printing. For instance, if you take a piece of paper, a hard hand-made paper that's half-way damp, it requires about one-quarter the quantity of ink to be black than if it's dry. If it's dry, it's like printing on a piece of tin, the paper is so hard and the ink won't take on it. We printed *Leaves of Grass*, 400 copies, 400 folio pages and every sheet of paper was dampened. And every sheet had to be kept at a uniform dampness, so I built a cupboard and lined it with an old blanket and kept the water in it. Every day I had to dampen a thousand sheets of paper to print the next day. There were 450 copies of the *Leaves of Grass*. Every day I dampened nine hundred sheets of paper and it would be right for printing by the next morning, not too wet. If the paper was too wet it would become too soft and the ink, being very stiff, would pull it into the rollers. Do you see?

Teiser: Yes.

Grabhorn: The life is taken out of the paper with the damp. I think that *Leaves of Grass* is the most perfect book we ever printed. Of the 450 copies there weren't 25 copies destroyed.



Teiser: You must've worked terribly carefully all through it.

Grabhorn: Yes. And kept the ink even. I bought some old woodcut ink from an old company, that had been made forty years earlier. You couldn't put a knife down into it, it was so hard. I was going to put in the colophon in the book: "450 copies printed and the press destroyed." [Laughter]

Teiser: How did you work the ink then, if it was that dry?

Grabhorn: Oh, with a knife, back and forth. I usually used a hammer on a piece of marble and hammered it out.

Teiser: Did it have different kinds of pigments than were available later? Was that why you got the old ink?

Grabhorn: No, no. It was all carbon black.

Teiser: Why did you get the old ink then, instead of getting what was available?

Grabhorn: Because it had been aged.

Teiser: Is that important?

Grabhorn: That was important to me. I was kind of lucky to find the ink.

Teiser: Was that printed on a Colt's Armory?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: When you came to San Francisco, what equipment did you have first?

Grabhorn: I had the Colt's Armory press. And Albert Bender....  
[pause]





Teiser: What did Albert Bender do?

Grabhorn: He was a patron.

Teiser: Did he help you?

Grabhorn: Yes. He would loan me money and then make me sign a note for it. I don't think he charged me interest. He bought some of the books. Usually he'd buy ten or twelve and give them away.

Teiser: Did he pay cash?

Grabhorn: In advance. He lent me up to \$300, took a note for it.

Teiser: Did you bring type from Indianapolis to San Francisco?

Grabhorn: Yes. I brought type and I brought a small Colt's Armory press, ten by fifteen inches.

Teiser: What kind of type did you bring?

Grabhorn: Some Goudy type. And I also brought some Caslon. The man who gave me the hand press gave me the type.

Teiser: You had done well enough in Indianapolis then, to come out here?

Grabhorn: I set up advertisements in those days. When I came out here, I set up all the ads for H. K. McCann Company, and I made \$40,000 a year setting ads. I quit because you had nothing to show for it at the end of the year, except money. I decided I'd rather print a book.



Teiser: It must have been hard to do.

Grabhorn: No, because money as money never interested me.

Anecdotes of the San Francisco Printing World

Teiser: You mentioned that you were a member of the union.

Where did you join the union?

Grabhorn: Indianapolis, before I came out here.

Teiser: Which Union was it?

Grabhorn: Typographical union.

Teiser: Were you ever a member of the pressman's union?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: But you did run a press?

Grabhorn: Yes, but in order to get a label I had to employ a union pressman and a union printer.

Teiser: But you didn't later, here at the Grabhorn Press, did you?

Grabhorn: No. I didn't because the secretary of the union came up to call on me. And I had framed the title of a Kelmscott book called *Reynard The Foxe*. This fox was spelled f-o-x-e. Morris had made it *Reynard the Foxe*. He read it in my shop, *Reynard the "Foxee"*. He read the Kelmscott page and thought they'd made a mistake by putting an E on the end of fox. I thought, "If he's that ignorant, no use for me to join the union."

Teiser: So you gave that up.



Grabhorn: I gave that up. That was so dumb. [Laughter]

The funniest thing that ever happened to me: one day I bought a book. It was a bunch of essays written by an Englishman, published about 1890. It was the essays of Giacomo Leopardi, who was a very famous Italian, lived about 1800, died in 1833. These were his essays, written originally in Italian and translated into English. And there was one essay I liked very well. It was for the New Year, called "A Dialogue Between an Almanac Seller and a Passer-by." I reprinted this for a Christmas card. It was about eight or ten pages long. I sent one to a friend of mine who was editor of the *Publisher's Weekly*, a man by the name of Meltzer. And he wrote a criticism of it. I had just come to California, and somehow they reviewed it in *Publisher's Weekly*. The next thing you know--there was a librarian for the State of California in Sacramento, called Milton Ferguson, a very nice fellow. The State Library of California wrote to me--to Giacomo Leopardi. They were collecting California authors, and he would be personally thanked if he would send them one of the Dialogues; and by the way, they'd be happy if he autographed it. [Laughter] At that time there was a reporter on the Hearst newspapers, and when



Grabhorn: I showed him all this correspondence, he wanted me to autograph a copy and send it to the State Library. I said, "No, I'm not ready to leave yet." He meant he would go and discover the Giacomo Leopardi autograph. [Laughter] And I thought I would get run out of the state if I did that, so I wouldn't do it. But I thought it was the greatest joke that ever happened.

It reminds me of a dinner John Henry Nash gave one time. There was a woman who came here to visit Nash. She was the wife of a very famous printer. Her name was Anne Cobden-Sanderson. She was the wife of Cobden-Sanderson in England. And she came to California. A man who was editor of a New York magazine told me she was coming to San Francisco and he wanted to give her a luncheon. "And by the way," he wrote at the bottom, "I must warn you, she's a vegetarian." One day I was called up by John Henry Nash. He said, "Listen Ed, will you come to lunch? Anne Cobden-Sanderson is going to be there today." And I thought, "Oh my God, and I was asked to give her a luncheon." So I went down to Nash's office. He had a great big table set up by a caterer. At every other plate was a bottle of wine and a large plate of salami and meat. And at the head of the table was an already-prepared





Grabhorn: turkey. Nash and I went back in the composing room. And I said, "By the way, John Henry, I don't want to worry you, but did you know that Anne Cobden-Sanderson was a vegetarian?" He said, "Oh, no. It's too late to do anything about it now. But she eats turkey, doesn't she?"  
[laughter]

Teiser: That's a wonderful Nash story.

Grabhorn: He was a bicycle rider.

Teiser: He was?

Grabhorn: Yes, a champion bicycle rider in Canada.

I think the funniest thing was a party the printers gave Nash when he was made M. A. of Mills College. Of course, me and Bob were invited. I sat there, and I never have laughed so much in my life, because here was a great big table full of drunken printers. You know how they would be. At the head of the table sat Nash, and an advertising man, a fellow by the name of Walter Gardner. He had written Nash's prepared speech. They thought it was a great thing for San Francisco: a printer had been made an M. A. of Mills College. And Gardner got up and started to talk, what the initials M. A. meant. He had all kinds of definitions for M. A. and a platemaker got mad. He claimed he should have gotten the degree because he made the plates for Nash, who got the credit. This story is a little



Grabhorn: rough. This man [Gardner] got up and said,  
"Gentlemen, a lot of you don't know what M. A. means.  
But I'll tell you. It means Mechanical Arrangement."  
And he went around through different things the  
initials M. A. stand for. And finally he said, "But  
I want to tell you, M. A. means....." and a drunken  
printer hollered, "My ass." And the meeting broke  
up. So I was telling Albert Bender about it. He  
said, "I wish I had known. I would have liked to  
have had Aurelia Henry Reinhardt there." [Laughter]  
She would have been a fine one.

Teiser: Nash printed for her, didn't he?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: But then didn't you later print things for her,  
too?

Grabhorn: Yes. She and I got into a fight. She wanted to  
build a new building at Mills College. And she  
wanted me to do a piece of printing they'd charge  
fifty cents for, to go toward the building of the  
new building. I wouldn't do it. I said I couldn't  
make them any piece of printing that would look like  
fifty cents. [Laughter]

She was a funny sort of a woman. She was  
very beautiful and persuasive. She could probably  
get anything she wanted, especially from poor  
Bender. He was susceptible.



Teiser: Bender was susceptible to a lot of things, wasn't he?

Grabhorn: Yes. He was crazy about a cousin called Anne Bremer, who was the artist. In fact, I think he was in love with her, according to Maynard Dixon. But all artists, you know, belittle other artists.

Teiser: Did you know Miss Rosalind Keep's little press at Mills College.

Grabhorn: Yes. She employed a man who used to work for me.

Teiser: Who was that?

Grabhorn: Kennedy, Alfred Kennedy. He was a very nice boy.

Teiser: Did she do very good work?

Grabhorn: No, she didn't. Alfred Kennedy worked for me.... the book we did for the Book Club of California, the Columbus letter\*--it's got Alfred's name in it. It says "Type set by Alfred Kennedy."

Teiser: Was he with you for a long time?

Grabhorn: Yes. We started in business at 47 Kearny Street, on the fourth floor. Alfred came over then and worked for me. He set type on the first book we did for the Book Club [of California], called *The Gracious Visitation*, by [Emma] Frances Dawson.\*\*

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\* *The Letter of Christopher Columbus*, 1924

\*\* 1921



Grabhorn: Yes. That was the first book we printed in California. The next book was *The Letters of Oscar Weil*. He wasn't W-i-l-d-e-; he was W-e-i-l.

Teiser: Was Alfred Kennedy still working for you then?

Grabhorn: Yes. Then when we moved up to 526 Powell Street, Alfred set the type on the Columbus letter, which we printed for the Book Club. So he worked for me a long time through the years. He had three or four brothers. Their father was a preacher, who started a printing office in Oakland, and they weren't doing very good work, you know. Alfred was what you might call a compositor with ideals.

Teiser: You had a number of other people working for you, didn't you, from time to time?

Grabhorn: Well, they'd come around. I didn't employ many. They would help out, set type and do things.

Teiser: Was much of the work that you printed hand set?

Grabhorn: Yes. I had a young fellow from Germany who came. His uncle ran a type foundry. He came over and worked for quite a long time.

Teiser: Was he a good typesetter?

Grabhorn: Oh, very good, very meticulous, you know.

Teiser: And Bob set type too?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: And you set some type?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: But, also, you did some of the presswork?





Grabhorn: I did most of the presswork.

Teiser: But you also employed some pressmen?

Grabhorn: Yes, I did for a long time. One was a drunkard. He would work one week and be off six weeks.

Teiser: What was his name? Was that the one that David Magee told a story about--his being gone six weeks for a piece of chalk?\*

Grabhorn: Yes. He'd say to me, "Ed, we're out of French chalk. Can I go get some?" His name was Tom Hewitt. And then he'd come back about six weeks later. "Where'd you go for that French chalk, Tom? Paris?"

Teiser: So you ran the press while he was off?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Drunkenness was a printer's occupational disease, wasn't it? Pretty prevalent among printers?

Grabhorn: It was prevalent among all Americans.

Teiser: Was it?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: People in other occupations as much as printers, do you think?

Grabhorn: Oh, yes. But especially house painters.

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\* p. ix, "Two Gentlemen from Indiana," in *Catalogue of Some Five Hundred Examples of the Printing of Edwin & Robert Grabhorn* [1961]



Teiser: I wonder why.

Grabhorn: Well, you didn't have automobiles or radios; you didn't have diversion. What else was there to do but get drunk? You know you could take a dollar and have the most marvelous drunk. On Saturday night a glass of beer was five cents. They'd give a free lunch, like oyster stew. Why go home to the same old meal when you could get something different at the saloons? They made a practice of serving good meals for five cents. In fact, when I worked as a printer I used to go to the saloon for lunch because lunch was only ten cents. I never ordered beer; I never liked beer. But I ordered a glass of pop--soda water--and it would be ten cents. I'd get a free lunch with it.

Teiser: Wasn't your first shop in San Francisco on Kearny Street, above the candy shop?

Grabhorn: Yes, the Orange Blossom candy store. It was a large firm during the fair. The fair was 1915. This was only four years after. It went into receivership. A friend of mine by the name of Herbert Rothschild became the receiver. He was also receiver for moving picture houses, the California and the Granada.

Teiser: So he rented you the space?

Grabhorn: No. I didn't know him then.

Teiser: You came to know him?



Grabhorn: Yes. I printed books for him, Christmas books. Those days were quite different from now. There used to be a bunch of us that would get together in Jack Newbegin's book store. Herbert Rothschild would come there; Jim Tufts, who was editor of the *Chronicle*, would be there. And we'd talk. One time Tufts said to Herbert Rothschild, "Listen, Herbert, why don't you get out a new book. I have three stories of Bret Harte's. They were all written together but never published together, and they should go into one book."

Rothschild said, "Is it very long?" And he said, "No, only about twelve pages." "Well," he said, "Ed, make me a Christmas book of it, will you? And Jim, you edit it."

Well, it was a book of two hundred pages. So he brought me the copy and he was to read proof. Of course, we didn't have enough type to set it all up, and he'd come very occasionally and read the proof.

Teiser: Did you have to set part of it and distribute the type?

Grabhorn: Yes, and print it. So I did that, starting in about August. And I printed on it until Christmas time. And we finished it on Christmas Eve. So I had it bound in one night by a binder, a hundred copies, and sent it to Rothschild. Of course, he



Grabhorn: [Tufts] gave Rothschild the idea it would be a very small book. Rothschild was a big sport, "I don't care what it costs, go ahead and do it."

Teiser: What was the title of it?

Grabhorn: I forget.

Teiser: About when was that?

Grabhorn: I suppose about 1925. Sometimes we worked on it until ten or twelve o'clock at night. And I sent the hundred books out to Rothschild on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. He called me up. I was going to charge him \$500 for the work, although it was worth a lot more money than that. And he called me up on Christmas Eve and said, "The books just came to me. Now send out another wagon and take them back." I was going to write the bill for \$600, so I added \$600 more to it when he called up and said, "Send out another wagon." I charged him \$1200 or \$1500 which wasn't quite enough.

Teiser: He actually refused them?

Grabhorn: Yes, because he didn't get them in time to send them out for Christmas.

Teiser: What did you finally do with them?

Grabhorn: I sent them out to him and he kept them all. He gave them away casually, I guess.

Teiser: Are there any around?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: Is he still alive?





Grabhorn: No, he died some years ago.

Teiser: Did he pay you?

Grabhorn: Yes, he eventually paid me.

Teiser: Who was doing your bookbinding at that time?

Grabhorn: I employed a woman by the name of Hazel Dreis.

Hazel Dreis was a great friend of a friend of mine, Albert Elkus. We had an apartment together. Albert sent Hazel (he was in love with her) to England to learn about bookbinding. She came back after three weeks and knew all about bookbinding, knew how to tear a book apart but not how to put it back together again, you know. Being that Albert thought she was a genius, I had to support her.

Teiser: She eventually became a very fine bookbinder, didn't she?

Grabhorn: No, she never was. She worked for me for a long time, binding *Leaves of Grass*.

Teiser: Did she bind that?

Grabhorn: Yes. But I had to go over every copy with my own binder because she broke the backs of the books. Do you know what breaking the back of a book is? You open it in the center and put the two parts together then put it back and look at it, and you see a crack right down the middle.

Teiser: What binder went over them with you then?

Grabhorn: A man who worked for me by the name of William



Grabhorn: Wheeler. She made me a price of \$900 for the books. Then I bought the leather and got the boards all ready. Then I had a bookbinder working for me; I had him go over every book and fix it up.

Teiser: Bill Wheeler?

Grabhorn: Yes. She said she'd bind them for \$900. I said that was all right, I wouldn't hold her to it too closely. She'd send down every week and get \$250. One time she sent down for a check, and I said, "I won't pay you any more money until I look up and see how much I've paid you." I looked, and I'd already paid her \$1300. So she turned around, when I wouldn't pay her any more, and sued me for \$3000 more. Herbert Rothschild paid the bill. He wouldn't let it come to court. He said, "When a woman sues a man, the man has to pay." [Laughter]

### Presses, Types and Other Considerations

Teiser: Why did you use the Colt's Armory press always? Why did you favor that press?

Grabhorn: Because I had it.

Teiser: No, but you got new ones.

Grabhorn: I never bought a new press in my life. They were all second hand.

Teiser: But really, how did you happen to stick with the Colt's Armory?



Grabhorn: Because you can get a heavier impression on that type form. And, listen, printing on hand-made paper, a cylinder press has a rolled impression; and a rolled impression puts more strength on the least resistant. And when you set up a line of type all the ascending or descending letters--all the p's and q's, you know, in the line--are punched--hit harder--by a rolling impression, so they get blacker. But when it's solid--the type page is solid--when an impression hits it, it makes what you call a cleaner impression on the type, and a more even impression. So the l's and the p's and q's don't punch through the paper because that part that has a little resistance with a strong impression prints very strong.

Teiser: That explains why you used the Colt's Armory, and still do.

Grabhorn: All type that is very good, designed type, is what they call script line. That means that the ascending letters and descending letters are all sort of--let us say an a takes up one-third of the body of the type and a p and a q would take up one-third. That means the other two-thirds of body is used for ascending letters. They don't require as much impression to make them show as it would if they were all equal, if the whole face was filled up,



Grabhorn: like, say, a capital W, where the whole body is type. But when the ascending letters only take up one-third of the body of the type, you don't have to hit them as hard as you have to hit an m or an n or a vowel.

Teiser: Because they take up more space?

Grabhorn: Yes. And therefore they resist the impression more than a lighter form of the type. You're not recording what I'm saying?

Teiser: Yes, I am.

Grabhorn: Well, that is the reason: the more resistance there is to a type form on the page you're printing, the more pressure you have to put on that type form to make it look legible. Now on a cylinder press the paper is put on a roller, and when you roll something over it, it hits hardest where it first strikes, when it starts to roll. So your impression is not what you call even, as it is on a flatbed press where the type comes smack up against the paper, you know.

Teiser: And the Colt's Armory was the only flatbed press...

Grabhorn: It was the only flatbed press that I could get a strong enough impression on.

Teiser: Were there any other flatbed presses still being made?

Grabhorn: Yes, but their arms were weak. I mean by the arm





Grabhorn: these two iron bars that control what you call the platen. The platen is what you put the paper on. And those arms would break in two where the impression resistance was very strong. The axis is stronger on a Colt's Armory press, and you don't have that breakage, even on a heavy impression.

Teiser: You, habitually, in your books, have made a heavy impression, have you not?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: So that it even sometimes showed through a little?

Grabhorn: The reason for that is that when you print, your type should become a part of your paper. And to have that heavy impression you force your type into the paper so you can't take a razor blade and scrape the printing off the page, you know. You'd have to split the paper.

Teiser: The furthest away from that is offset, isn't it?

Grabhorn: Yes, and lithography, which just lays the ink on the surface of the paper. When your type becomes a part of the paper you have durability. That's the reason a Gutenberg Bible is more beautiful today than when it was printed, because the quality of the black ink was so good that it didn't become pale with the years.

Teiser: You have been very critical about your inks too, have you not?



Grabhorn: Oh, yes. It should all be carbon black without shine. A page of type that shines--it shines on smooth paper that is used to print half-tones on. It's very hard to read when the type shines; it's hard on the eyes.

Teiser: What kind of types have you favored?

Grabhorn: I've favored type that doesn't have excessive thicks and thins in its design--that is, doesn't pop.

Teiser: And there is a family of types, generally.....

Grabhorn: Yes, there are two kinds of type. The dividing line was about the year 1800, when the map makers began making descriptions on maps in a pen letter that had excessive thickness and thinness, and copper plate--when they print by what's called copper plate method, they make the down strokes unusually heavy and the curve strokes excessively light. When you print on a very smooth paper, which shines, it's rather hard to read, such as magazines with a lot of pictures in.

Teiser: So the kind of types that you have used.....

Grabhorn: .....have been types that you could press into the paper and they become a part of the paper.

Teiser: That don't have these very light strokes?

Grabhorn: Yes. In the making of letters, the first letters were all made with what they called quill pen--that is the feathers were used to make the letters



Grabhorn: so you got a kind of uneven stroke all the way through. Then when they made pens with steel points, you got very fine lines. The year 1800 was the dividing line for the kind of pen that was used to make type. All the early types were made copies of the quill pen, not the way the steel pen made it. The steel pen was used for copper plate engravings more than quill.

Teiser: The first type that you bought was in what class?

Grabhorn: The first type was made by Goudy. It was a quill-pen design. Goudy was not a type designer. He was a bookkeeper, and he designed an alphabet of type as an amusement and sent it to a typefounders, and they bought it from him. That's how he became a type designer.

Teiser: What type of his was it that you bought first?

Grabhorn: Well, his best type, his Kennerley. The form was taken from the stone inscriptions of the early Italians.

Teiser: Then what was the Franciscan type that you had as your own type?

Grabhorn: Well, it was what is known as a half-Gothic. It wasn't a pure Gothic type. Gothic types are more decorated than other types, and they also are heavier. I've always liked the Gothics. People say they can't read them. It's ridiculous. They can't read



Grabhorn: them because they're unfamiliar with them. The Germans read everything in Gothic and can read it rapidly too.

Teiser: How did you happen to get the Franciscan type?

Grabhorn: It was a design that Goudy made, and they never accepted it.

Teiser: Who was it made for originally?

Grabhorn: I don't know. He never told me. I only paid him \$700 for both the type design and the matrix from which to cast it. I think American typefounders now don't use those methods of making types. They make electrotypes. In other words, the type is drawn about a foot high and reduced down to a very fine line. And then they copy that with steel punches. There are very few punch cutters left any more.

Teiser: Do I remember that the matrices of the Franciscan type were lost?

Grabhorn: Yes. They were lost when we moved from one place to another.

Teiser: But you still have a good deal of that type?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: So you can still print with it?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Where did you have it cast?

Grabhorn: I had the Monotype Company cast it.





Teiser: Right here?

Grabhorn: Right here in San Francisco.

Teiser: That was Carroll Harris?

Grabhorn: Carroll Harris, yes.

Teiser: Did he<sup>\*</sup>set a good deal of type for you from time to time?

Grabhorn: Not very much, because his machine was limited. He couldn't set 18 point as body type--12 and 14. Franciscan is 18 point. He couldn't set that by machine; he didn't have the equipment to set 18 point. He didn't then. They might have some 18 point now. He can cast, though, any size type.

Teiser: Then you hand-set it?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Did you hand-set the body text of many books?

Grabhorn: Yes, of many. It was much cheaper than machine. For instance, we set *Two Years Before the Mast* by hand.

Teiser: Didn't it take up a tremendous amount of space?

Grabhorn: We got about 1200, 1500 pounds of type. As long as you have enough to set up eight pages, you can print them and then throw the type in and reset it.

Teiser: You distributed as you went?

Grabhorn: Yes, you can do that.

Teiser: You proof read carefully, then, as you go?

Grabhorn: You proof read, but you can't be too careful. I

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<sup>\*</sup>i.e. his firm, MacKenzie and Harris





Left to Right: Robert Grabhorn, Edwin Grabhorn, Sherwood Grover.  
Grabhorn Press, 1959. Reproduction rights reserved by Ruth  
Teiser and Catherine Harroun.



Grabhorn: remember one time--the funniest thing I ever did in my life--I used to have Francis Farquhar read a lot of proof. Then I set up a colophon. In it I thanked Francis Farquhar and I misspelled his name in it. [Laughter] To misspell anybody's name! I've been told that every time a man was sentenced to be executed at San Quentin, what would make him madder than anything else was if the newspapers misspelled his name. I thought it was a funny thing: I thanked Francis for reading the proofs and spelled his name *Farqhuar*. It's *quhar*. When I looked at it, I realized I had made a mistake, but I didn't have enough paper to reprint it. So I said it had to go. And I thought it was so funny, but Francis never thought so.

Teiser: Who did all this hand composition?

Grabhorn: I had a boy working for me by the name of William Grover and his wife, Katharine. They set the type for *Two Years Before the Mast*.

Teiser: Did Bob Grabhorn set some of it, too?

Grabhorn: Well, we called in everybody to fill in where it was necessary, even in binding. Everybody had to work.

Teiser: Did you set some of the type yourself?

Grabhorn: I never set too much type. I make too many mistakes.

Teiser: Did you teach Bob Grabhorn to set type, or did he learn from someone else?



Grabhorn: No, he always worked here and set the type. I never had the patience to set straight matter. You take a book like *Two Years Before The Mast*, that was first printed in a library that Harper's did, Harper's Library. They'd set up one of these books and print it every day. You can imagine how fast they did it.

Teiser: Setting them up on machines?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: How long was it in your shop?

Grabhorn: It was in the shop, I guess, six months.

Teiser: Did Bill Wheeler bind it then?

Grabhorn: Yes. I never liked too much of Bill Wheeler's binding. He was raised in a basement, you know, and his binding was neat. He was a neat, clean binder, but he was quick-minded. His work was too fast. And about binding, you have to be awfully careful, because the boards just curl up. People don't know how to take good care of a book. They'll buy the expensive book and put it on the dining room table where the sun shines on it. And the sun will warp anything, you know.

Teiser: Who did most of your binding?

Grabhorn: Bill Wheeler did most of it.

Teiser: Were there any binders that you considered very good?

Grabhorn: Yes. I had Otis Oldfield bind a couple of books for





Grabhorn: me. We had no equipment. Instead of using boards, he pasted sheets together until it was thick enough.

Teiser: Did it work out all right?

Grabhorn: Not too well. He did a book for me, I still have it at home, a large folio. Bound it in pigskin, which is hard to bind in.

Teiser: Did he ever do any editions?

Grabhorn: No, he didn't do any editions.

Teiser: Did you send some books out to the trade binderies?

Grabhorn: Not many; I couldn't trust them. They were too bad, too expensive. They just did commercial binding that they slopped through, you know.

Especially, a person never ought to take a book and lay it by a window where the sun shines on it. Now, for instance, if you bind in vellum--you could take a piece of vellum, wet it, tie it around your neck, and it'd cut your head off when it shrinks. It's very tough stuff.

Teiser: What kind of papers did you buy?

Grabhorn: Usually hand-made papers.

Teiser: Where can you get them?

Grabhorn: Europe. They don't make them much any more. For *Leaves of Grass* I bought what they call unbleached Arnold. But I wet every sheet of that paper to print it; it was so hard.



Teiser: You must have spent a lot on paper. Hand-made paper is not inexpensive, is it?

Grabhorn: I spent about \$2000 on the paper for *Leaves of Grass*.

Teiser: Did you order it through American agents?

Grabhorn: No. I needed 2000 pounds, and they were going to put my watermark in free of charge. They wanted a dollar a pound. Then I found out that I could order direct, so I went down and ordered direct. It cost about \$1100. That was Zellerbach Paper which was going to charge me \$2000--\$900 profit to them for buying the paper. I couldn't afford that.

Teiser: Who did you buy it from then?

Grabhorn: Arnold Company, in England.

Teiser: Did you ever have anything bound in England?

Grabhorn: No...yes, I had one book bound in England, for President Hoover, a special book, one volume. It's down at the Bohemian Club. I paid \$300 for that binding. It consists of manuscripts of all his speeches at the [Bohemian] Grove. I had them mounted into the book.

Teiser: Actual manuscripts?

Grabhorn: Actual manuscripts.

Teiser: But you set the title page?

Grabhorn: Yes. And I set the pages they went in. They're on all kinds of paper and cardboard, little scraps of paper.



Teiser: I was just thinking about the time scheme. As I remember, your tendency was never to deliver a book on time. [Laughter]

Grabhorn: You know, that reminds me. I had a date with Albert Bender, and he bought me a watch and gave it to me, a little watch, about a \$25 watch. And three times I made a date and I never kept it. One day I went down, and he said, "Well, the mistake I made was to buy you a \$25 watch. If I had all the money in the world, I'd buy you the best watch in the world."

And I said, "If I had all the money in the world, I'd destroy it." [Laughter] I felt like Whistler. Somebody said, "Where were you at 7 o'clock last night?" And he said, "I've never been anyplace in the world at 7 o'clock." [Laughter]

Teiser: The people you have always printed for always knew that they were not going to get their books on time, haven't they?

Grabhorn: I don't know about that. But I always figured, if the person was dead, what difference did it make if he was dead a year or two weeks or a hundred, if he was dead when his book was printed, you know.



Book Publishing and Illustrating

Teiser: You mentioned the other day that you worked with Random House on several books.

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: How did your connection with them start?

Grabhorn: When Bennett Cerf started it, he came to California. He and I went to lunch together. And somehow or another he wanted me to print three books for them one year. I printed two, but I never made the third. One book was the *Life of Benvenuto Cellini*. The other was *The Red Badge of Courage*. The third was a book by Hawthorne-- it was a long book, two volumes. What was it?

Teiser: I don't know. *The Scarlet Letter* is short.

Grabhorn: No, it wasn't *The Scarlet Letter*. Valenti Angelo was working for me. He went back east and he took the designs for the book with him and had the Limited Editions Club reproduce it.

Teiser: The same book that you were going to print?

Grabhorn: Yes. I got into a terrible fight with the Limited Editions Club. When they first started in business, they wrote to me and wanted me to print *Robinson Crusoe*. They offered me \$15,000 for 1500 copies. The fellow's name was Macy. He was going to furnish me all the illustrations by a well-known illustrator. He sent the cuts out to me and claimed they cost him





Grabhorn: \$1500. And I wrote back and said he was a liar. Then he took the \$1500 off the price he was paying me for the books. He was to pay me \$15,000. The final check was around \$700 or \$800. He sent the cuts out to me by mail and put \$25 postage stamps on them and asked me to send the stamps back to him because his boy was collecting stamps. I sent the stamps back. Then he charged me the \$25 for the postage. One letter led to another and we got into a terrible fight. My final check on that--when the job was finished--was about \$500 or \$600, after he subtracted all the money he could. I got so mad. They wanted me to print some more books, and I wouldn't print anything. I said No.

I remember one time Farquhar came and had me go to lunch with a friend of his, a librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society. All during the lunch hour, all they talked about was what a crook Roosevelt was, which irritated me because I liked Roosevelt very much. I printed two books for him. He never knew there was anything going on in America like fine printing until after I printed those books. Then he never forgot it. He used to tell everybody he had me print them, you know.

Teiser: One was *Naval*.....

Grabhorn: *Naval Sketches of the War in California*.



Teiser: What was the other?

Grabhorn: Both were the same. You have the original over there in Bancroft. It was given to you by Kenneth Bechtel. It was offered to me once for \$15,000. I didn't have \$15,000. I had printed two books of those kinds of sketches, and I was rather disgusted with printing any more of them.

Teiser: How did President Roosevelt happen to come to you to print them?

Grabhorn: Well, he was talking to Bennett Cerf. He wanted to get the book printed, but it was so expensive to do. Roosevelt was a rather close buyer, you know. Nobody could touch him. So Cerf said to him that he was coming out to San Francisco and he'd bring them out to me and have me print the books.

Teiser: So he did?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Were they ever on sale?

Grabhorn: Oh, yes. But Random House had very poor marketing conditions. I didn't like to do books for them. If they had any books left January 1, no matter what book it was, they remaindered them. And when you print a book for \$25 and on January 1 it comes out for \$5, it kills the sale of the book among book dealers, because they don't like that. That's what killed John Henry Nash's bibliography--three



- Grabhorn: volumes. He couldn't sell it very fast and he remaindered some copies. And of course you could buy it for almost any price after it had been remaindered. Book dealers had bought copies at maybe \$50, and they could've bought it before [after] Christmas.
- Teiser: Those were the Clark bibliographies?
- Grabhorn: No, the Cowan bibliographies.
- Teiser: How was it that John Henry Nash couldn't stay afloat financially when you could?
- Grabhorn: Well, the printer--when you brag about how much money you get, the tradesmen begin overcharging you, you see? He was overcharged for everything.
- Teiser: He was?
- Grabhorn: Probably, yes.
- Teiser: He did things very big and fancy too. I suppose he couldn't scale himself down.
- Grabhorn: No. Nobody should tie up to one millionaire, one prince. You'll lose your shirt if you do.
- Teiser: There were always many people interested in buying your books, weren't there?
- Grabhorn: Yes, we never overpriced them, I don't think.
- Teiser: I think you underpriced them often, didn't you?
- Grabhorn: Well, I would rather underprice them and sell them than become a storage house for unsold books.
- Teiser: Your Americana series, wasn't that one of the



Teiser: wonders of the Depression--that it went over?

Grabhorn: Yes. That was a good idea. We took excessively rare books and printed them. There were not many copies of the originals, and we sold them at prices like \$2 and \$3.

Teiser: At first--

Grabhorn: No, we never had a book over \$3. We sold ten books in the series, and the series was \$25.

Teiser: To dealers or retail?

Grabhorn: Retail. So that was \$2.50 apiece. We only charged \$2 for the life of Sutter.\*

Teiser: They went like wildfire, didn't they?

Grabhorn: Well, you know the difference in books going like wildfire is maybe five extra copies. You see, that was the Depression. We knew what we had to do was to make a book valuable for its contents, rather than just as a book. We went over that pretty thoroughly. Now, for instance, the life of Joaquin Murieta\*\* would cost anybody around \$500. So when we printed it for \$3 it was a good buy, you see.

Teiser: Valenti Angelo worked with you for quite some time, didn't he?

Grabhorn: Yes. He first came to the shop--he was an artist and engraver. He had never worked as a printer before. But he was a very speedy man. I remember we did *The Scarlet Letter* for Random House. There

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\* Watson, Douglas S., *The Life of Johann Augustus Sutter*, 1933.

\*\* *Joaquin Murieta*, 1932.





Grabhorn: are twenty-five chapters and I wanted a cut for every chapter. He went home that night and brought me the next morning the twenty-five designs for it. They looked like postage stamps; they were very small. And I wouldn't use them. He was god-awful. He wouldn't design anything that looked like Picasso. I remember, I was printing the *Book of Job* and I wanted to get an unusual picture for it. He came the next morning with Job--a big folio it was--with Job naked. And one Jewish collector objected to it because Job wasn't circumcised. [Laughter] He said, "You've got an error in the book."

Teiser: Angelo was a skillful artist, was he not?

Grabhorn: Well, he'd do anything and do it quick too. He wasn't as bad as Maynard Dixon. Maynard Dixon was in the shop when we got an order from Random House to print *Leaves of Grass*. I told Maynard, and he said, "Let me illustrate it." I said, "You can't illustrate the *Leaves of Grass*." I said, "Listen, Maynard....."

He said, "Let me make some illustrations." He went out of the shop and came back the next day with some of the funniest illustrations I ever saw in my life. He took lines from Whitman--"I loaf and invite my soul" Then he made a picture of Maynard Dixon on the top of a hill with the sun



Grabhorn: shining on his face, his hat over his head--he was loafing and inviting his soul. The next one he picked out was, "I sing the body electric." Then he had a man and woman standing on a rope over a chasm and they had sparks going out of their bodies. They were the funniest thing I ever saw. I'd have been the laughing stock of America if I had used them. They had on coarse knit underwear. I said, "Maynard, I'm sorry, but I can't use your pictures."

Oh, he got so mad. When you deal with an artist, you know, they get terribly mad. But, you know, when they make pictures, the whole world looks at them, and I would have been ridiculous.

I said, "You can't illustrate Whitman. I would like to have you make two pictures, one for the beginning and one for the end."

Teiser: Did he do that?

Grabhorn: No, he didn't do a thing.

Teiser: Did anyone illustrate it? I don't remember.

Grabhorn: Valenti Angelo. We decided, finally, if we were going to illustrate it we'd take just common wood, type high, and cut it right there, without preliminary designs, so they were sort of rough. My brother Bob stood over him and watched him cut these things. And when we got one we thought we



Grabhorn: could use, we took it, you see. But even he was too rapid an artist. You have to be awful careful dealing with the art work you're putting in a book. It must go with the type. And I had a theory: a book was like the human body. And the back of the book is like your back, with the spinal cord down the back, and should show all the things that went to bind the book together. Those cords should show, as they're part of the book. They shouldn't be false. They are on most English books. The backs are always false. The paper should be sewed around the cords; you can see the signature.

Teiser: Mallette Dean did some work for you too?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Was he easier to work with than the other artists?

Grabhorn: No. You could tell Mallette--we could set up the pages around here--we wanted the pictures to go with the pages after they were set up.

Teiser: Did he then make the pictures?

Grabhorn: Not many. He did on a few early books, color pictures. Then we were printing colored pictures.

Teiser: He hand colored them, did he?

Grabhorn: No, we made cuts and printed the cuts.

Teiser: Did he work here as a typesetter or a pressman?

Grabhorn: No, but he did a little of it so he could start his own shop.



Teiser: But he was never regularly employed here?

Grabhorn: Never as a typesetter.

Teiser: You never used halftones, did you?

Grabhorn: No, because these presses don't print halftones. A halftone has to be printed on a rolling press, so you do not get a flat impression. You get what you call a pinpoint impression.

Teiser: Because of the dot formation?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: And you didn't want to have any printed for you?

Grabhorn: Yes. Mostly Meriden printed them.

Teiser: Gravure, then?

Grabhorn: Gravure, yes. I did a very big book with gravure illustrations by Meriden; it was a book on Arizona. It had a lot of pictures. The Yale Library had the original drawings of the day\*.

Teiser: But then many of your illustrations you printed here?

Grabhorn: Yes. All the pictures my daughter\*\*made for Shakespeare we printed here.

Teiser: And many on earlier books, too?

Grabhorn: That was according to what kind of illustration. If there were colors in them, we put the colors on the press and printed them.

Teiser: You printed the whole things, then?

Grabhorn: Yes. When we printed a book for the Limited

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\* du Bois, John Van Deusen, *Campaigns in the West*, 1949.

\*\* Mary Grabhorn





Grabhorn: Editions Club, we had 1500 illustrations. There were 1500 books, which was a large edition for us. And we printed the illustrations and had them inserted around the pages. The binders did that.

Teiser: You printed them here, though?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: From wood blocks?

Grabhorn: No, they were colored. I had a boy working for me who did a sloppy job. He never was very exacting. This boy is dead now. Jack Gannon was his name.

Teiser: Were they from metal plates?

Grabhorn: Yes, they were zinc etchings. They were the ones they charged me \$1500 for.

Teiser: Did you often print illustrations from metal plates?

Grabhorn: Yes. Zinc. Very rarely halftones. That kind of press doesn't print halftones well. It takes a rolling press to print halftones well.

Teiser: The Shakespeare illustrations were from.....?

Grabhorn: Woodblocks.

Teiser: How many colors in most of them?

Grabhorn: I don't know. They were printed on that handpress there. Mary [Grabhorn] and I did them together on Saturdays and Sundays.

Teiser: The problem of registration must be great in that sort of work.





Edwin Grabhorn, 1961  
Reproduction rights reserved  
to Marjory B. Farquhar



Grabhorn: Not too great.

Teiser: Is the book you're doing now from linoleum blocks?

Grabhorn: No, not necessarily. The linoleum blocks are used for tinting the paper. It is all creamed, and we make a little cream impression over the whole print. It kind of ties it together.

Teiser: What are the other blocks here then, wood?

Grabhorn: No, they're linoleum. But you can't make too fine a line in linoleum. It'll widen as pressure goes on it. You have to have pretty fine lines on some of these, so you have to hit it what you call delicately.

### Collecting

Teiser: I want to ask about your book collections.

Grabhorn: Oh, that! My God! I could tell you a lot of things about the Bancroft Library. You see, I collected a tremendous amount of California material. I even have all the letters of Bancroft and Knight\*when they first started. I was going to give them to Bancroft, you know.

Teiser: You have them now?

Grabhorn: Yes. It was Knight who started Bancroft collecting. He got out California almanacs. He didn't have enough material to work with and he insisted that Bancroft had to buy California books so he

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\*Hubert Howe Bancroft and William H. Knight.



Grabhorn: could get the material for his almanacs. That's how it started. And I got those letters. I'm sort of a purist. When I have something that belongs to somebody else, I like to see them get it, you know.

Teiser: How did you get the Bancroft-Knight letters?

Grabhorn: His son, Emerson Knight, was a very good friend of mine; he was one of Knight's sons. He had a brother who was quite well to do, lived in Arizona. The brother had books published, part of the letters published. And the brother sent the letters to him and he turned them over to me.

Teiser: You certainly have had a talent for gathering unusual and valuable items. You're a born collector, aren't you?

Grabhorn: Yes. Well I had this feeling about it: I always had the printing in the background. And I felt there were many great reminiscences in the newspapers that never were put into book form, and there was an opportunity for books. One time I bought the *Sacramento Union*, a file of it, and it had all Mark Twain's letters from the Hawaiian Islands. They were never published. We published them in a book, *Mark Twain in Hawaii*. He gave a series of lectures, over there and some over here, about his times in the Hawaiian Islands. He went over,





Grabhorn: I think, in 1866. They were published in the San Francisco papers.

Teiser: So a lot of your collecting was with an eye toward publication?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Was that why you collected your Americana material, or did you start collecting first and then decide to publish some of it?

Grabhorn: I started collecting first and then decided. I figured when a pamphlet, in that time, cost \$1500, it could be reprinted and sold for \$2 or \$3 and would have a ready sale. Such was *Joaquin Murieta*.

There were at that time several men we called scouts who were running around in people's houses and found things.

Teiser: Do you remember any of their names?

Grabhorn: One man's name was Cashmaker. He was very Jewish. He got into the business buying old gold. For instance, during the war, platinum was selling for a high price. He told me he went to a lady's house in San Jose and described the value of platinum to the lady. Then he asked her if she had any. She said, "Mister, all my cooking utensils are platinum." [Laughter]

Cashmaker found the Pownall stuff in an old house in Oakland. He hid a lot of this stuff, such



Grabhorn: as envelopes with Pony Express marks on them. He hid them behind a rafter in the basement, he told me. He didn't have enough money to buy all of it at once. He didn't. And he was such a character that nobody charged him more than a dollar or two for anything.

He told me one time he went into a lady's house and she had a doorstep of gold quartz. She was using it to stop the door with. He had no money. He looked at it. He asked her if she had anything else. She went to another part of the house. He broke off a piece and took it home and cracked it up, then took it to the mint. And they gave him \$35 for the gold. That was what she wanted for the whole bar. So when he went the next day he gave her the \$35 and took all the quartz with him.

Teiser: Albert Dressler was another scout, wasn't he?

Grabhorn: Albert Dressler. Albert wasn't as good as Cash-maker.

Teiser: Did you get some things from Dressler too?

Grabhorn: Yes. I bought two copies of the Constitution of the State of California printed in San Jose, from Albert Dressler. It was much rarer than the state constitution printed.....you see, San Jose was the capitol of the state, the first capitol of California.



Grabhorn: And a great deal of things were gotten at San Jose.

Teiser: Did you say that your first interest in collecting came through a bookdealer on.....

Grabhorn: Polk, by the name of H. A. Johnson. He sold me the Powell's *Journey*, which he offered first to the Bancroft. At that time who did you have at the Bancroft?

Teiser: Priestley, was it?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: Bolton?

Grabhorn: Bolton. Bolton refused to buy it. He wanted \$925 for it, and I bought it. I didn't know anything, but I took his advice on what was valuable. He sold me a pamphlet called *The Pile* for \$25. It was printed in San Francisco in 1851. It was a list of all the rich men in California.

Teiser: Then that whole collection that you bought you sold to Thomas Streeter, was that it?

Grabhorn: Yes, I sold it to Tom Streeter. Most of it.

A man who lived in Livermore who left his stuff to the Bancroft Library.....

Teiser: Tom Norris?

Grabhorn: Tom Norris. He bought that *Journey*. He also bought a sketch book with pictures of the pueblos in California. They have it over there. The



Grabhorn: same with the Vischer missions.

Teiser: What journey did he buy? The Powell?

Grabhorn: Powell, which was the first picture of Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo, San Diego.

Teiser: So you were buying and selling both at the same time some of the time, were you?

Grabhorn: Some of the time. One time I bought from Cash-maker a roll of 40, the Mining Laws of the Town of Columbia, printed there in 1852. I kept giving them away. I only paid \$2 for the forty. But I gave one to a man who sent it to an auction and it brought \$65. And here I was. I had about twenty of them left. And [bookseller] George Fields was printing a catalogue, and I put this item in the catalogue for \$20. We sold every one. The second one was sold to Thomas Streeter, a book dealer in the East, New York. And Eberstadt bought two copies. And he began writing nasty letters that I was printing them. [Laughter]

Teiser: Were you?

Grabhorn: I wasn't. [Laughter]

At that time I had Douglas Watson working for me. Douglas Watson used to claim that he was the grandfather of Herbert Hoover's grandchildren, because his daughter married Herbert Hoover, Jr.

Teiser: Did he serve as business manager for you at one time?





Grabhorn: Yes. He never was a business manager. He worked for John Howell. He collaborated on *Seventy-Five Years in California*.

Teiser: Did you have somebody working for you as a business manager at one time?

Grabhorn: Yes. Only for a week.

Teiser: Who was he?

Grabhorn: He was Watson.

Teiser: It didn't work?

Grabhorn: No. I didn't need a business manager.

Teiser: You also collected a lot of paintings and American prints, didn't you?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Was this at the same time?

Grabhorn: At the same time. I sold those to a print dealer in New York.

Teiser: You still have a good many here, haven't you?

Grabhorn: No. I had a lot more. I used to have a tremendous quantity of California pictures.

Teiser: What dealer did you sell those to?

Grabhorn: He came out from New York. A big print dealer in New York. He's still in business.

Teiser: Did he put out a catalogue of them?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: Then you also collected Japanese prints. Did you start that later?



Grabhorn: Yes, that was started later.

Teiser: How did you happen to start that?

Grabhorn: Oh, I don't know. I was always interested in pictures. I bought four prints in San Jose that were all reproductions. I didn't know a reproduction from an original until after I bought some. I had to pay high prices. I had a friend of mine, by the name of Eric Mayhill. Eric Mayhill was with Fox Film photography. He was on the Panay when it was bombed. He was an Englishman. When he came back to the United States, I said, "Eric, you ought to write a book about your experiences." He said, "I know it, Ed. There isn't a good book on Chinese art." [Laughter]

I wasn't thinking of Chinese art. I thought-- he took those pictures, and they showed them all over the United States.

Teiser: What pictures?

Grabhorn: The bombing of the Panay.

Teiser: Did he then interest you further in Japanese prints?

Grabhorn: Yes. He had bought a couple of prints and he got broke. He wanted to sell them.

Teiser: Where did you buy most of your Japanese prints, from the Orient or in this country?

Grabhorn: From Japan. I paid a high price for the first one.



- Grabhorn: It was a Hiroshige. I paid \$200. I found out that when you pay \$200 for something, you'd better look into it and see how good it is.
- Teiser: Wasn't it difficult to buy directly from the Orient? Did you know people?
- Grabhorn: I knew dealers. I'd been to the Orient in 1936.
- Teiser: Oh, you'd been there yourself?
- Grabhorn: Yes. And I met a Japanese dealer by the name of Shatiro Sato. In Japan in every city they had a print man who authenticated the prints. So if you were a tourist and went in and bought prints and they all were forgeries, you could take them to this man. If he pronounced them forgeries you could take them back and get your money back.
- Teiser: Did you buy prints when you were in the Orient yourself?
- Grabhorn: I didn't have too much money.
- Teiser: So you didn't really start buying prints then, but you knew about them from that period?
- Grabhorn: I knew about them, yes.
- Teiser: You have never sold any of your Japanese prints, have you?
- Grabhorn: No, because my wife, Irma, wouldn't let me sell them.
- Teiser: So that collection is still intact?
- Grabhorn: Yes.\* Everybody laughed at me, all the California

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\* Mr. and Mrs. Grabhorn were continuing to collect Japanese prints at the time this interview was edited in 1968 - R.T.



Grabhorn: scouts. They thought I was silly buying Japanese reproductions while they were selling me good Californiana.

Teiser: I guess you were right both ways.

Grabhorn: No. I was only right because time made them right.

Teiser: Maybe you're one of those people who can spot a trend coming.

Grabhorn: No. But a lot of the people thought that what I collected was good all the time. Francis Farquhar said he thought I would buy the original Ten Commandments. They'd be cracked a little, but I would have them. [Laughter]

Teiser: You've always like primitives, haven't you?  
American primitive painting?

Grabhorn: Yes. They were cheap, and nobody else liked them. The scouts used to bring me paintings. I said, I want to look at them, but I don't want to buy a Rembrandt." They were all Rembrandts.  
[Laughter]

Teiser: You started buying primitives before they were really popular, didn't you?

Grabhorn: I bought primitives, yes. I had some very good ones too. There was a man down in Visalia, California, who painted pictures of birds, California birds. I bought three or four of his paintings. All the birds of California. They





Grabhorn: were very interesting, very colorful, very decorative.

Teiser: Who was he?

Grabhorn: I forget his name. I had two of his paintings.

Teiser: What happened to that collection?

Grabhorn: It's over in the Oakland Museum. I traded it for Japanese prints.

Teiser: All of your American primitives?

Grabhorn: All the primitives.

Teiser: And the Oakland Museum had duplicate prints?

Grabhorn: No. They took the paintings from a man I traded to. A fellow whose name was Packard. I had a marvelous painting of the Cliff House, the beach out there. The painting was on copper. It was about 15 feet 15 inches one way, 12 the other. It showed the people getting ready to go bathing. They were all naked, women and men together, undressing right there. It showed what California was in 1850. [Laughter]

Teiser: Where did that go?

Grabhorn: That's in Oakland.

### Fine Presses and Fine Printing

Teiser: Back to your collection of books that were landmarks in fine printing. You owned the Kelmscott.....



Grabhorn: Chaucer. Ashendene *Morte D'Arthur*. I had the *Morte D'Arthur*. And I have another Ashendene book.

Teiser: Do you have some Doves [Press] too?

Grabhorn: Yes. But I didn't like the Ashendene as well as the Kelmscott.

Teiser: What did you admire about the Kelmscott books?

Grabhorn: Black and white. Ashendene began printing in green and blue initials. And the ink always was reduced, never looked as solid as black.

Teiser: Did you think that the Kelmscott Press books were well designed?

Grabhorn: I think they were well printed though.

Teiser: But not well designed?

Grabhorn: Well, it's a question of what you like. If you have likes in type, if you say, "I don't like a type because I can't read it," that doesn't mean the type is illegible. It means that you're not familiar with the characters. German printing could be very beautiful, and you couldn't read it either, but that's not the fault of the German. That's the fault of you.

Teiser: And the same with the Kelmscott press, is that it?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Types from that are difficult for most people to read, I suppose.



Grabhorn: Yes. They're not difficult. It's because they are not familiar.

Teiser: How about all that heavy ornamentation in the margins, the borders and so forth? Did you admire that?

Grabhorn: Yes. I did, because it didn't disturb me, because the pages were even in color. Nothing popped. The page didn't pop at you, didn't have distractions on it.

Teiser: And you admired the presswork?

Grabhorn: I admired the presswork, and I admired the quality of the ink and the quality of the paper. The hardest thing about printing is you start to print a page and you've got to keep that page in front of you constantly and match the next page with it. You don't want to go through a book that has what you call uneven color, one page very light and one page very dark. That's irritating to you, you know.

Teiser: What about the typography and design of books, though, as well as the presswork? What have been your ideals?

Grabhorn: My ideals: any distractions from the printed page are an interference with thought. Thought must flow rather freely. Let's say you're reading a page and you come across a curious



Grabhorn: ornament, you're disturbed. Besides, a thing that people don't know about, to a man of taste, who knows the history of art, a page of type can speak about five or six languages. The ornament can be of one generation, the type of another. And those things are all disturbing factors.

Teiser: Yes, if you know.

Grabhorn: Yes. For instance, a type that's designed by a steel pen is disturbing to a man who can read type that's designed by quill pens, because of the different thickness and thinness of lines.

Teiser: Do you feel they should not be mixed?

Grabhorn: No, they shouldn't be. Nothing on a page should pop when you're reading it.

Teiser: What about period feeling, or whatever? When you reprinted classics of Americana, did you try to...

Grabhorn: I had no books earlier than 1860 printed in America, that I could get a feeling from.

Teiser: What did you do?

Grabhorn: I ignored.....you take the Powell journal that we printed. It's printed in Italian style, Italian type of printing. That could be disturbing, because it's an 1849 period. We have no good period printing of 1849 and '50.

Teiser: Are there some good periods in American printing that you were influenced by?

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\* Powell, H. M. T., *The Santa Fe Trail to California*, 1931.





Grabhorn: There was one good printer, Houghton-Mifflin Press, that printed books continuously from that time to the present day. They were always master craftsmen. They always did good presswork.

Teiser: Were there any individuals involved in it whom you knew?

Grabhorn: Bruce Rogers.

Teiser: Did you admire Bruce Rogers' work very much?

Grabhorn: I admired Bruce Rogers. He was what you call an interpretive printer. In other words, if he was doing something for milliners it had a feminine look, you know.

Teiser: This you did, too.

Grabhorn: A little bit.

Teiser: Haven't you always tried to make the look of the book suit the subject matter?

Grabhorn: Yes. I always believed the title page was the front door to your house. By the looks of that you wondered if the house was attractive. I got into a lot of trouble. I printed a book called *Robinson Crusoe* for the Limited Editions Club. A man by the name of Edward Wilson did the designs. I had to use them. And he had everything on the title page except the back yard, you know. So I cut it apart and threw away parts of his design. He got very mad and wanted to sue me for doing it.



Grabhorn: I figured it was too cluttered up with guns and shovels and things like that.

Teiser: You have always allowed your own title pages, though, to be tours de force? I mean in contrast to the text, which should not have distractions.

Grabhorn: As I just said, the title page was the front door. You knew what you were going to see after you turned it over.

Teiser: But the title page might be quite elaborate compared to the text?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Colors, many colors?

Grabhorn: Not too many.

Teiser: How have you felt about the use of colors in printing?

Grabhorn: I never thought much about it. It was sort of background for red and blue initial, because all printing was copied from manuscript books and they were always beautifully colored.

Teiser: But you have not used many colors, have you?

Grabhorn: Sometimes, but I didn't like to use too many. In the first place, there's very little type designed for red and colors. It's much thinner, the body of the type, and it should be stronger. In other words, a red initial of the same type as the book is too weak.



- Teiser: When you worked out books in advance of printing them, I imagine you thought them out....
- Grabhorn: Listen, trial and error procedure. Lots of times we halfway printed a book and then threw it all in the ashcan and started it over because the idea was too silly to carry through.
- Teiser: It wasn't working out?
- Grabhorn: Yes.
- Teiser: I think you did that with *Leaves of Grass*, did you not?
- Grabhorn: Yes. *Scarlet Letter* also.
- Teiser: What do you consider the best book you printed?
- Grabhorn: People always ask me that. I think one of the best books was Cabeza de Vaca.\* It was printed nicely.
- Teiser: It lived up to your ideals of what it should have been?
- Grabhorn: Yes. And it was a readable type. Whether it was Spanish or not--and I didn't think it was....We had had a fellow working with us by the name of Valenti Angelo. He always was hasty in making pictures when we were printing a new book. They may look good as pictures, but they didn't fit the text.
- Teiser: But in Cabeza de Vaca they did fit?

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\* *Relation of Cabeza de Vaca*, 1929.



Grabhorn: No. We had to redesign it. Because he wouldn't hesitate to draw the coat of arms of Cabeza de Vaca, but he never attempted to look it up. And the coat of arms has to be as carefully designed as anything.

Teiser: Did he redo everything himself then, for that book? Are the final designs in it his?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: But you made him redo them?

Grabhorn: We made him study something about coats of arms.

Teiser: Did you reject his first designs, then?

Grabhorn: I think we must have. We always rejected a lot of things. For instance, his designs for *The Scarlet Letter* were never used.

Teiser: What was the worst book you've printed? [Long pause. Laughter]

Grabhorn: You know, when I go to a place and people show me books we've printed, I have no memory of ever doing them. I'm as surprised as they are.

Teiser: Do you like them in general?

Grabhorn: I think they're pretty good. I used to object very much to the elaborateness of Nash. I mean he used to do a \$50 book and take the designs from the ten-cent store.

Teiser: Did you consider his printing pretentious?

Grabhorn: No. I consider his work was a waste of time. You





Grabhorn: know, after all, ruling a page is imitation of old manuscript pages, which were always ruled in red ink. And you should never do an imitation of anything that was done by hand because the brilliance of the handwork, the nervousness of it, is lost. There's no nervousness in the mechanical rule.

Teiser: Did you admire John Henry Nash's typography, other than the rules, though?

Grabhorn: Not necessarily, but that's no fault against him. I think Nash suffers from what most Americans suffer from, to be overrated or underrated, you know. I mean, he printed a couple of little books by Eugene Field, *How Willie Wet the Bed*. Now that shouldn't be done with hand-made paper, you know, as Americana. It shouldn't be done like a Clark catalogue.

Tesier: How about his Dante, how would you rate that?

Grabhorn: I wouldn't rate it because it has no feeling of Dante. The only feeling of Dante is made by Aldus. Aldus printed the first Dantes. They were small books in italic type with Roman capitals. His was a large folio.

Teiser: That brings up the sizes of books. As I remember, people used to kid you about never printing little books, always printing huge books.



Grabhorn: Well, I found out, too it was a matter of price. You print a little book and put a lot of work into it and the most you get for it is \$3. You print very big books, even if they have only half a dozen pages, you can justify \$20, \$25 for the price.

Teiser: So that was really why?

Grabhorn: Yes. I printed the Sutter, a very small book and charged \$2 for it.

Teiser: Did you think it was a good book?

Grabhorn: It was a nice little book, yes.

Teiser: If there were no economic factors, would you have preferred to print small books?

Grabhorn: No.

Teiser: Does a large book give you more scope?

Grabhorn: A small book is harder to design. It's harder to make it look good. Why do you think people buy Rolls Royces, or big automobiles?

Teiser: Do you remember Nash's early work, the Tomoye Press books, those little ones?

Grabhorn: He worked for Paul Elder.

Teiser: Do you remember seeing those books?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Do you like those?

Grabhorn: No, I never liked those. Paul Elder had a better printer before Nash. I think his name was



Grabhorn: [John B.] Swart.

Teiser: You thought he was better?

Grabhorn: He was better, yes.

Teiser: How about Taylor and Taylor? Did you admire their work?

Grabhorn: I admire Ed Taylor very much. Ed Taylor was a man of taste. One time I was arguing in a sort of way with a painting collector who collected modern paintings, and I said to him, "How do you like this Picasso stuff?"

"Oh," he said, "the trouble with most people, they go to a museum, they walk in, they walk out, and they say they don't like it. You must give some thought to it. If you live with it you find you come to like it."

I said, "Well, I think art was born and died with James McNeil Whistler."

He said, "Whistler was a man of taste, but it takes more than taste to paint a picture." So I never could look at another Whistler after that.  
[Laughter]

Teiser: I asked you what you think the worst book you ever printed was. Can you think of any you wish you hadn't done?

Grabhorn: Yes. A man came in on Kearny Street. I printed a book of sonnets for him. About as bad as anything I ever did.



Teiser: Your printing or the sonnets?

Grabhorn: My printing.

Teiser: You'd rather not think about it, I suppose.

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: I suppose most of your work does still please you, doesn't it?

Grabhorn: No. I never liked to look at it after. I never was one to fall in love with my own work. And I'm always surprised when somebody shows me something I've printed; I don't believe it.

Teiser: [Reading from book] *This Fortunate Man*, by Edward DeWitt Taylor: "Who can deny that Gutenberg, Aldus, Bodoni, William Morris, our own beloved Benjamin Franklin, and men such as George Jones of London, Updike of Boston, and the Grabhorns right here in San Francisco, in fact all those who have added luster to the great art of printing....."

Grabhorn: Jones was from London, but he visited over here.

Teiser: Was he very good?

Grabhorn: Yes, he had a pretty good reputation.

Teiser: Edward DeWitt Taylor admired you, then.

Grabhorn: He admired everybody.

Teiser: Did you think he was a good printer?

Grabhorn: Henry was a good printer. Edward had too much theory; too much influenced by Updike. You must look at printers as men who go to a masquerade ball.





Grabhorn: They go in a dress-up suit and formal, and they are out of place among their contemporaries.

Teiser: That was the case with Edward Taylor?

Grabhorn: Taylor was always reserved Boston. I have something of a prejudice against Boston. Being a Californian, I believe we have just as much culture as they have on the east coast.

Teiser: And more freedom of expression?

Grabhorn: Yes. More individual. Not so Puritan. They used to call the California school of printing, of which Nash was the leader, they used to call us unnecessary. In fact, Carl Rollins wrote a series of articles against California printers. And I wrote a series of letters back to him in opposition to his ideas. He said California printing was like California oranges and like the women, when you bit into them there's nothing there. I wrote back and said, "We don't bite our women."

[Laughter]

Teiser: Who was this?

Grabhorn: Carl Rollins. He was from Yale. Rogers worked at his place somewhat. I later knew him. His wife still lives in Mill Valley. His daughter's married; his son-in-law is a prominent lawyer by the name of Green. I haven't seen her for many years.



Teiser: You have always maintained.....

Grabhorn: I've maintained it's a damn poor dog that won't fight for his own kennel. In fact, we issued a broadside, that was very good, against him one time. I think I have a copy. It's "They Haven't Raised Printing to An Art." We made a picture out of the rules at the bottom of it.

Teiser: Who's they?

Grabhorn: The East. "A new art has been discovered."

Teiser: You often created things for fun like that, didn't you?

Grabhorn: Not too often, but sometimes.

Teiser: What's going to happen to fine printing? Who's going to carry it on?

Grabhorn: Well, you know--who carried it on to us? Fine printing? There's no such thing as fine printing; it's only a workman who's serious, who takes pride in his work.

Teiser: Are there any now? Young ones?

Grabhorn: I don't think the world's going to die, do you?

Teiser: No, but I wonder if the economic system under which you were able to print as freely as you did is gone.

Grabhorn: Yes. But as things grow steadily harder to get, they'll increase in price, so the price will attract them in to do fine printing.



Teiser: The price of the earlier fine printing will attract others in the future?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: You don't know of any now who look as if they're coming up?

Grabhorn: No. But I know that the youth are awful ambitious; young people in college. No, it isn't lost. Nothing is lost here.

Teiser: Even though there is not direct continuity?

Grabhorn: No. I had a little saying one time. I always thought it was sort of a poem: "Make the best that in you lies. Good work's a thing that never dies." [Laughter]

A printer....one time I tried to do some good work, and I said, "Oh, they don't know it!"

He said to me, "You're not responsible for what they don't know." I think that's the best thing I ever heard. I'm not responsible for what they don't know, so I'm going to work and show them what they ought to know.





Francis P. Farquhar (right) and Dale L. Morgan signing each other's copies of G.P.H., An Informal Record of George P. Hammond and His Era In The Bancroft Library, 1965, designed and printed by Lawton and Alfred Kennedy. Friends of The Bancroft Library meeting, May 23, 1965. Reproduction rights reserved to Marjory B. Farquhar.





"Comments on Some  
Bay Area Fine Printers"

by

Francis P. Farquhar

April 1, 1968

Because circumstances prevented Francis P. Farquhar from interviewing Edwin Grabhorn, as was originally planned, the Regional Oral History Office asked Mr. Farquhar to make comments upon the Grabhorn brothers and other printers of his acquaintance for inclusion in the Edwin Grabhorn interview volume. They follow here, with few changes from the original transcript of the tape Mr. Farquhar made.

Mr. Farquhar earlier briefly discussed San Francisco Bay Area printing in his full-length interview<sup>\*</sup>, and he initiated the Regional Oral History Office series on the subject when in 1960 he interviewed Edward DeWitt Taylor.<sup>\*\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup>Farquhar, Francis P., "On Accounting, Mountaineering, and the National Parks," typed transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Willa K. Baum, Univ. of Calif. General Library Regional Cultural History Project, [Berkeley, 1960] pp. 376. In Bancroft Library.

<sup>\*\*</sup>In appendix of Farquhar interview, pp. 296-341.



Francis P. Farquhar

April 1, 1968

Edwin Grabhorn

Farquhar: This is April 1, 1968. Francis Farquhar speaking at his home at 2930 Avalon Avenue, Berkeley. I would like to say a few words about my friend Edwin Grabhorn and his work as a printer. Ed has recently retired from printing due to a paralytic difficulty that makes it impossible for him to stand up at the press any more. But over a great many years he has been one of the great printers of San Francisco, in fact, of a much wider horizon than that.

He has done a great deal to influence fine printing in California and has led the parade without dispute for a long time. He was associated with his brother Robert during most of the years of the Grabhorn Press. But Robert was never a partner. He was a faithful co-worker with his brother, but Ed was the proprietor of the business and paid Bob a salary. Bob's work was largely in the field of composition of typography, of which he was a great artist, while Ed had general supervision and did the presswork.

His presswork was in some respects unique.



Farquhar: He had a wonderful feeling for just the right pressure to put on the press to produce the results that he wanted. He always came out with strong, clearcut results. And he developed his own method of producing color.

In some of his great color books, the illustrations were originally on black and white lithographs. Then he would take those and superimpose the color. He could use almost anything for a method of producing prints. I have seen him pick up a piece of linoleum off the floor and put it on the press and come out with a beautiful composition for the cover of a book.

In the more delicate work he would cut out the design, color by color, and sometimes put it through the press fifteen or twenty times. I know that was the case in some of his Japanese print books.

Teiser: Did his wife work on those?

Farquhar: His wife, Marjorie, helped him a great deal, but it was always Ed's work. She did a great many things in the shop. She passed away some years ago. Later Ed remarried, to Irma, who has been very faithful in helping in the transition of his career from a printer to a semi-invalid.

One interesting thing about the Grabhorn Press is that it had a great freedom and versatility.



Farquhar: There was no cut-and-dried method. Ed didn't plan out his compositions or his presswork in advance. He just went and did it. And he was a consummate artist. His work showed great artistic quality, and the freedom from conventionality, although he never did any striving for unconventional work. It just came out that way.

He had a keen sense of color and knew how to make color combinations without any rules. I don't think he ever studied the techniques at all. He just went and did it.

One characteristic of his presswork was that he believed in putting ink into the paper, not just on the surface, not just kissing the plate onto the surface of the paper, but putting the ink into the paper. And it's likely to last. That's one reason that these books will probably last for generations.

Teiser: Some people have criticized this. They call it "punching through" if they don't like it. They call it a good impression if they do.

Farquhar: There are two different styles in that thing, and Ed is a master of one of them. He probably could do the other if he wanted to. But he believes in putting the ink into the paper.

The atmosphere of his shop was always one of





Farquhar: great informality. At first glance it had the appearance of being pretty well cluttered up. But he could find his way through all this irregularity. It is illustrated very well by a photograph of Ed that my wife took one time in the old shop on Commercial Street. Ed is sitting in a chair and above him is a portrait of John Henry Nash, who had quite different techniques. Nash is looking quite sour, and Ed has got a broad grin on his face, which characterizes them both. And all around is the clutter. A string is dangling down from the ceiling, which seems to have no particular place in the picture, but actually adds to the characterization as well as the composition.

Teiser: Was that photograph published, Mr. Farquhar?

Farquhar: It was published in the book about the Grabhorn Press that David Magee got out.\*

Ed's work was versatile. He could print a wide variety of things. He did a great deal of Californiana during the Depression. He conceived the idea of getting out a series of books on California at moderate prices.\*\* The first one

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\* *Catalogue of Some Five Hundred Examples of the Printing of Edwin and Robert Grabhorn, 1917-1960.* San Francisco: David Magee; n.d. A special edition of this catalogue contained twelve illustrations from photographs by Marjory Farquhar.

\*\* This was generally known as the Americana series.



Farquhar: was the Joaquin Murieta book, which I edited for him and wrote a little preface. It sold at a very moderate price but since then has gone very high in auction sales.

The Californiana series that he did during the 1930's was a great success and led on to other things which continued up until his retirement.

He took up the idea of reproducing Japanese prints. He had made a very wonderful collection of Japanese prints, of the originals. He worked out his own way of reproducing them. As I said, first by black and white lithography, and then superimposing the color by cutouts. The result is four or five books of the great Japanese prints, books that will survive in art collections for many, many years, I am sure.

Teiser: What about the economic aspects of the Grabhorn Press from your observation?

Farquhar: Ed never paid any attention to the economic aspects. He said one time his idea of properly running the accounts and the financial side was to have a box outside the door in which you put in the money that he owed to others, and they could come and take it. He didn't want to be bothered with anything else. But actually he knew just



Farquhar: about where he stood. He always paid his bills and people were always ready to pay the price that he asked for his books. In fact they clamored for the opportunity to pay it.

Teiser: He was very intelligent about generating books with the proper editing.

Farquhar: Oh, Ed was very well informed on the subjects that he printed. I have heard him in a group with professors of history telling them things in their own department that they had not been aware of. And yet Ed never got beyond about the eighth or ninth grade in grammar school and never went to college. Nevertheless, he has two Doctor of Laws degrees. One from Mills College and one from the University of California.

An interesting episode occurred in the case of the latter. The Regents voted to give him a doctor's degree but he said he could not accept it unless one was given to his brother Robert at the same time, because he felt that his brother was equally responsible for the fame of the work that had been produced by the press. So at the commencement exercises, the two brothers stood side by side and the degrees were conferred upon them simultaneously. Which I think is perhaps a unique procedure but well merited, and appreciated by the Grabhorns and all their friends.



Teiser: What do you see as Bob Grabhorn's contribution to the whole? If there was a particular one.

Farquhar: Bob was a connoisseur of type, typography. He had studied it and had quite a collection of books on it. And he had a natural flair for making up a page of type. I think that was his principal share. He had many other things too. He was a good balance-wheel in the whole enterprise.

Teiser: Jane Grabhorn gave a little addendum to Bob Grabhorn's interview and indicated that their personalities balanced each other.

Farquhar: Yes. I think it was something like this: that when Ed was away Bob went to pieces, when Bob went away, the press went to pieces. Or maybe it was vice-versa, I don't recall. [Laughter] Anyhow, they were a good pair and produced great works of art. And I think they should be viewed as works of art and not as commercial propositions, although they did a great deal of commercial advertising work.

The works of the Grabhorn Press became collectors' items. Book collectors and collectors of artistic work are all around. And the bibliography of the Grabhorn Press was picked up rapidly by collectors who checked off [what they had acquired]--I had a copy and I found at one time I





Farquhar: owned eighty-seven percent of the items listed in that book. In addition to the ones listed, there were a great many ephemera, like Christmas cards and greeting cards of many kinds that he did for his friends, usually without ever sending them a bill. Those are of great value as artistic achievements. They were done offhand, as it were, not with any trial layout.

You'd tell Ed that you wanted to send a New Year's card or a Christmas card and he'd pick up something, some type or an old cut out of a box, and pretty soon you had a work of art.

Teiser: He did many cards for you, did he?

Farquhar: Yes, for a great many years he printed our New Year's cards. There are some very interesting, beautiful pieces. Some that he did for people like Mrs. Elkus, with the Southwest Indians on them, are really very important things. Although they are not formal books, they are really great works of art.

He did a great collection for Tom Norris for Christmas cards. That series is a great achievement in artistic printing.

In all of this, both the Grabhorns have been very modest. They never have tried to exalt themselves in any way. They just went ahead and printed what came along.



Teiser: Where do you feel they stand in the whole printing tradition of San Francisco?

Farquhar: Grabhorn added versatility and color and originality to the printing, as a great artist rather than as a craftsman. Although he was an adequate craftsman, his leadership evolved from his artistic concept and his ability to produce beautiful things in great variety.

Murdock, The Taylors, and Nash

Farquhar: Would you like me to go back to something about the beginnings of fine printing in California?

Teiser: Yes, very much.

Farquhar: It's my opinion that the beginning of fine printing in California that led to its leadership in the printing world began with Mr. Charles A. Murdock, back a good many years ago--whether it's in the 'seventies or 'eighties I don't recall. But he did a lot of good printing. It was in good taste always. I don't recall just exactly what he did, but he did the early numbers of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* and established a good format for it. The work was always legible and clean and attractive. Murdock had his own press and he associated with others later on. Finally he had to give it up.



Farquhar: He wrote a little autobiographical sketch called *A Backward Glance at Eighty*, which gives the biographical background.

He had a great influence on the Taylor brothers, who held him in high regard and succeeded him in the printing of the Sierra Club *Bulletin*. And that's the connection that I had with them.

Edward Taylor started printing in the partnership called the Stanley-Taylor company. But then he took it over alone. Finally his brother joined. His brother Henry went to the Harvard Business School and studied typography there and then came back and joined Ed under the name of Taylor and Taylor.

For a year John Henry Nash was associated with them and the firm name was Taylor, Nash, and Taylor. The initials are significant, TNT. It blew up. It was incompatibility from the start. They had different concepts of printing and of different practices.

Nash went his own way and Taylor and Taylor continued in their production of good, conservative printing, carefully studied out in every way, the materials always of the best. Ed Taylor made a great study of ink and the chemistry of ink. Later he developed that into the production of paint for fine oil painting. He found that the



Farquhar: paints that painters were using were not always of the quality that was best adapted to their work, as for instance, the painting of William Keith. Keith, in his later days, used a paint that made his browns turn black. It was a chemical reaction. Edward Taylor made paints that he felt would stand up better in the course of time, which I think is true. He himself took up painting and produced some very fine paintings, and also some etchings.

Teiser: What has happened to his art work?

Farquhar: Well, they're in many art galleries. I'm sure the San Francisco Museum of Art has some.

Teiser: Those owned by him, I mean, since his death.

Farquhar: Oh, I don't know. He'd disposed of most of them by the time of his death. There were one or two left. We have several of his etchings here. And he gave us as a wedding present a very interesting landscape called "Red Barn." Very vivid red roof he saw one time when coming home from Carmel, made notes of it and then came home and did an oil painting of it in his studio.

Teiser: When did he start painting? Was it as a young man?

Farquhar: No, he didn't start painting until well along in years.

Teiser: Did the impetus to his painting come from his





Teiser: interest in colors?

Farquhar: Yes, I think so. And in the production of paint for other artists. And he knew the artists very well, had close associations with them.

Henry Taylor was more of a student of typography. I think he looked at some of the eastern printers, such as Updike, as models a good deal. But the result of the combination always was work of great clarity and perfection. They had a man associated with them, Daniel Buckley, who did most of the typesetting during the time that I knew them. And he carried out their ideas very successfully and was an important influence in the good quality of their work.

Teiser: Can you compare the characters of the two men?

Farquhar: Well, I don't know. They were both friends of mine. They were quite different, but I wouldn't want to go into comparison of characters.

Teiser: I just meant was one of them more sociable, more outgoing than the other?

Farquhar: No, they were both that way, in their own way. They complemented each other very well in the artistic quality of their product.

Teiser: Could you speak a little about their type specimen book?\*

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\*Taylor & Taylor, *Types, Borders and Miscellany of Taylor & Taylor*, San Francisco, 1939.



Farquhar: That, I think, was originally Henry's idea, but he died before he had done any great amount of work on it and Ed took it over. And, frankly, I think he was a little unfair in not giving Henry credit for the initial idea, which I think Henry had. Anyhow, Ed added a great deal to it and developed a unique book in telling the story of each kind of type by some kind of illustration, actually telling the story as he set it up in type. It's a remarkable typographic book and one of great interest and one that I think is very highly thought of by printers.

Teiser: Do you feel that it is their major achievement?

Farquhar: Oh, no. They did so many other things. They did a lot of printing for the Standard Oil Company, the Standard Oil *Bulletin*. Their presswork was very highly regarded in those things that they did in quantity. They did a great many things in quantity, and it was always good work.

Teiser: Good commercial work?

Farquhar: Good commercial work.

Teiser: They also did some things that would be considered fine printing?

Farquhar: Yes, but they were not in the same category as the Grabhorns. They didn't print for fine printing. They stuck pretty well to printing on order. They



Farquhar: had to have a definite order, or understanding, before they printed. It was commercial; it was a very high type of commercial printing.

Teiser: Where would you place Nash?

Farquhar: Nash is a unique character. He had his own ideas of printing and he publicized them a great deal. He was a pompous man, a vain man. He did some very remarkable work. Some of his work I think is rather flamboyant, that is, beyond the necessity of the case. The most remarkable achievement I know of Nash's is that he printed a volume on, I think it was Shelley, and one on Coffroth. Coffroth was a prizefight promoter. And the two books look almost exactly the same in general appearance.

Nash had no sense of restraint in any way. He just flourished. I don't want to be running down Nash, because he had a great influence on printing in this area and some of his work is very fine. But in my opinion, he lacked taste and certainly he lacked modesty. On the title page of some of his work, he uses his honorary degree, John Henry Nash, Litt. D., Honorary.

Teiser: Don't I remember that Nash preferred to be called Dr. Nash after he received his honorary degree?

Farquhar: He was a vain man, I'm sure of that.

Teiser: Maybe people called him that as a joke.



Farquhar: No, no. He wanted to be called that, I'm quite sure. I have a degree, but I have not gone around putting it on things I have written.

Teiser: You have a variety of honors. You could put lots of initials after your name.

Farquhar: I don't think that adds to the work that you do.

Samuel T. Farquhar

Teiser: I wanted to ask you for some biographical information about your brother [Samuel T. Farquhar].

Farquhar: Sam. Yes. My interest in fine printing came largely through the influence of my brother. Sam was in the advertising business and got more and more interested in typography and studied it and began to confer with printers. He finally went into the printing business himself with Johnck and Seeger. He was with them for some years and assisted in getting out some very fine pieces of work. He studied typography a great deal and had a good typographical library.

Johnck's influence, I think, has not been sufficiently emphasized in the story of fine printing in California. He was a good master printer. He was a man brought up in the shop and lived his printing life in the shop itself, handling type. And he had excellent taste and was very influential





Farquhar: in getting out works of excellent taste. Seeger was a good accompaniment to him. They worked with Lawton Kennedy, who did their presswork and was influenced by them and carried on the tradition of Johnck a great deal in the excellence of work. I think the combination of John Johnck and Lawton Kennedy has had an important influence on the printing industry in San Francisco. It's not spectacular, but it's excellent for its cleancut quality and good taste.

Sam worked with them until one time--he used to go back and forth on the ferry when he lived in Berkeley--and one time he got better acquainted with a man who was interested in the classics. He found Sam reading Latin and occasionally Greek. He himself was a particular devotee of Horace in the original Latin. They used to read the Latin together on the ferry. That was James K. Moffitt, who was a Regent of the University of California. When the position of printer for the University became vacant, he proposed Sam's name for it and Sam became the University Printer. And through his knowledge of printing and the general business aspects of it, he combined the printing office with the publications in the University Press. They had been separate up to that time.



Farquhar: Then they outgrew the little printing shop on the campus and the University built a new shop on the corner of Center--right opposite the West entrance to the University--and moved in there and got out a great volume of printing for the University.

One of their great achievements was the printing of the Charter of the United Nations. That was a job that was given to the University Press, and Sam had supervision of the whole thing. They had to print it in, I think it was five, different languages. They worked out a cooperative agreement with a Chinese press in San Francisco for the Chinese text. And the work was carefully supervised at the United Nations. At the end it became a rush job. It was a remarkable achievement to get it out on time so that the delegates could sign the five original copies.

Teiser: And your brother had charge of this?

Farquhar: He was in charge of the whole job of printing the United Nations Charter.

Teiser: Mr. Tommasini is so often mentioned....

Farquhar: Sam employed Tommasini and valued his services very highly. But Tommasini worked under Sam. I don't think he has been quite fair to Sam in recent years, in claiming a little more than his share,



Farquhar: because it was Sam who supervised the whole work and brought Tommasini into it. They were always friendly and I'm still friendly with Tommasini, but I think he's been a little bit ungenerous to Sam in some of his statements lately. He is a good man; he's a good foreman of printing, but I think it was Sam that really was the inspiration of the fine work that the University Press did.

Sam was born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1890 and went to Harvard, graduated in 1912, came out to California in 1917, and was in the advertising business, as I said. He married and lived in Berkeley the rest of his life.

He was not quite happy in his marriages. He had two wives from whom he was divorced. Just before his death he married Hazel, who I think was very helpful to him. By that time, Sam was in weakened health. He contracted a very bad cold, or pneumonia, when he was back East, in Princeton, and died suddenly there in 1949.

I think he is very highly regarded by the professional staff of the University who had contact with him. He had the unique position of not only knowing printing as a business and as a craft, but he knew the substance of books. As I said before, he knew the classics; he was well



Farquhar: versed in Latin. He was able to talk with the professors that had books and things to publish and got along well with them. He spoke their language. He understood them and worked with them, and I think was very much appreciated. He still is very well remembered in the faculty.

Teiser: Was it when the press was under your brother's leadership that it started winning awards in the American Institute of Graphic Arts "fifty books" exhibits?

Farquhar: Yes, yes. Sam was the one that brought the University Press books into national prominence with finely printed and finely published books.

#### Lawton Kennedy and Others

Teiser: You mentioned Lawton Kennedy.

Farquhar: After John Johnck died and that firm dissolved and Lawton--he was always on his own as a pressman, but then he set up his own shop as a printer as well as a pressman. He had developed a great deal and has expanded and continued to do work of very fine quality.

Teiser: How long have you known him?

Farquhar: I've known Lawton since the days of Johnck and Seeger. I don't know the exact dates, but it must have been in the early 'thirties.





Teiser: I think you said you had a part in the controversy over the printing of the California Historical Society *Quarterly*.

Farquhar: Kennedy, for many years, printed the California Historical Society *Quarterly*. For some reason or other, he became at odds with George Harding, who was a director and very active in the Historical Society. And George was determined that Lawton should cease to have any printing for the Historical Society. Others of us felt that was most unfair, that he was doing a good job and should continue. I was one of the leaders in trying to keep the work for Kennedy and managed to hold it over for a year or two, but eventually the influence in Southern California took the printing away, and it has been done in the South since then. I think we lost something when we lost Lawton Kennedy.

Teiser: Your experience with serial publications, your experience as editor of the Sierra Club *Bulletin*, gave you, of course, a particularly good eye.

Farquhar: I was editor of the Sierra Club *Bulletin* for some twenty years. Then I was on the publications committee of the Historical Society. So I was familiar with the requirements for that kind of printing.



Teiser: Are there other printers who have carried forward this tradition of fine printing?

Farquhar: Haywood Hunt for a long time was one of the leaders of San Francisco printing, as a craftsman. I don't know the others so well.

Teiser: Lewis Allen...?

Farquhar: Oh, of course, Lew Allen holds a unique position. He and his wife do the very finest kind of highly special work. Their books are very expensive but they're thoroughly well done and they're great works of art.

Teiser: Do you feel they're in the Grabhorn tradition?

Farquhar: Yes, not copying in any way, but they're leaders in fine printing and highly original and artistic printing, rather than commercial. I don't think they do very much commercial work.

There are others, but I'm not familiar with them. I don't want to talk about those with whom I've not had close association.

Teiser: You have given a very fine picture of not only the Grabhorns, but of a whole span.

Farquhar: It's an era, just like the era of the late 'nineties, which was still remembered in San Francisco, not for printing but for writing. In this group I think you can sum it up through the establishment of the Roxburghe Club. That was



Farquhar: the idea of Sam and of Carl Wheat and a few others. The Roxburghe Club drew together the people in San Francisco and vicinity who were interested in fine printing, and in printing as an art and in book collecting, and brought together an excellent group. I think their story is pretty well told in the Roxburghe Club book that Magee got out.\*

Teiser: I wonder if the period did have a peak.

Farquhar: I think the era ended with the end of the Grabhorn Press. Of course, Bob Grabhorn is continuing with another partner and doing some excellent things. But somehow or another the period ending about ten years ago, the period of the preceeding twenty years, was the peak of fine printing in California, in the San Francisco area. While there are still good printers and will continue to be good printers, it isn't quite the same.

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\* *Chronology of Twenty-Five Years*. San Francisco: David Magee; 1954. Printed by the Grabhorn Press.



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## Renowned Printer

# Edwin Grabhorn Is Dead at 79

Edwin Grabhorn, renowned San Francisco printer, died Monday at the age of 79, after a long illness.

He was a member of the Bohemian and Zamoran Clubs.

Survivors include his wife, Irma; a daughter by a previous marriage, Mary Grabhorn, an artist living in London; a sister, Emma Smoyer of Indianapolis, and two brothers, Robert and Kenneth.

He was co-founder with his brother, Robert, of the Grabhorn Press, established in 1920 and dissolved in 1965.

The Grabhorn Press, whose books all became collectors' items, was once described as "a citadel of fine arts the equal of which would be hard to come by in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands or any other country where the art of printing is practiced."

### BEGINNINGS

Edwin Grabhorn, a native of Cincinnati, first became acquainted with printing in an uncle's music publishing firm in Indianapolis, where he learned the 400 character "music case" of type.

He came West, to Seattle, in 1909, a young man of 20, to work for a music printer at \$12 a week. There he met Henry Anger, known as the "artist printer" of Seattle, and Haywood Hunt, since 1915 a printer in San Francisco.

They introduced him to the work of the great American printer and type designer, Frederic W. Goudy, and young Grabhorn soon forsook the treble clef for the printed word.

### AWARDS

Returning to Indianapolis, he worked as a journeyman printer until he saved enough to buy the fonts of Goudy type necessary to establish the Studio Press.

In December of 1919, Edwin Grabhorn packed up his precious type and with his brother Robert, 11 years younger, headed West again — this time, San Francisco. They arrived here on Christmas Eve and the next month bought an old Colt Laureate press (a sheet at a time) and set up a small plant above the old Orange Blossom candy factory at 47 Kearny street.

### ON PRINTING

Within the decade they won international recognition — the medal of the American Institute of Graphic Arts for "The Letter of Amerigo Vespucci," considered the finest sample of book publishing in 1926, and an exhibit of "The Book of Job" in the British Museum in London.

In 1932 the Grabhorn brothers again won the Graphic Arts Institute's medal of award and in 1963 the University of California conferred upon them honorary doctor of law degrees.

"A well-made book is one of the most durable objects made by man," Edwin Grabhorn once wrote, citing the fact that some 42 copies of the Gutenberg Bible had survived the dustings of 400 years.

"If the present-day printer can recapture the strength and durability of the 15th century printer . . . but put something of his own day and age into his books, he will not have to worry about recognition. His future is assured."



EDWIN GRABHORN  
A long career

### PERFECTIONISTS

Edwin Grabhorn was too unassuming a man to intend anything personal, but the comment applies to the Grabhorns' work, with this alteration: they were so in-exquisite specimens of their art that they had no time to tensely absorbed in creating

Prints of Old Japan," an edition of 400 that sold for \$35 each. Edwin Grabhorn, a craftsman more concerned with his art than money (as was Robert), spent nine months on that work — considered by some connoisseurs as one of the finest examples of art printing ever. (John Howell, bookseller, reports it is currently priced at \$150.)

Some years ago a noted British type designer, visiting here, commented: "Sir, the Grabhorns are not the best printers in San Francisco — they're the best in the world!"

### APPRECIATION

Why had they picked San Francisco? Edwin, writing in 1948, said they were attracted by San Francisco's climate, "especially beneficial to the best kind of printing."

"With such natural advantages," he wrote, "and with a growing, appreciative audience, there is no reason why San Francisco cannot be-

come the seat of a permanent Renaissance . . ."

Twelve years later his prophecy had undergone a radical revision. In 1960 he told a reporter, without sadness or bitterness but merely as a matter of fact:

"Every year we get closer and closer to extinction . . . People don't have libraries any more. They have TV's. Most of our books are too expensive to collect. Everything is changing. We've outlived our usefulness."

Funeral services will be held at 11 a.m. tomorrow (Thursday) at Halsted & Co., 1123 Sutter street.



Ruth Teiser

Grew up in Portland, Oregon; came to the Bay Area in 1932 and has lived here ever since.

Stanford, B. A., M. A. in English, further graduate work in Western history.

Newspaper and magazine writer in San Francisco since 1943, writing on local history and economic and business life of the Bay Area.

Book reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle since 1943.

As correspondent for national and western graphic arts magazines for more than a decade, came to know the printing community.















